

## **Research Space**

PhD Thesis

**Representing ideal kinship in Medieval English literature before  
and after the Norman Conquest**

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**REPRESENTING IDEAL KINGSHIP IN  
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE BEFORE  
AND AFTER THE NORMAN CONQUEST**

by  
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**Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

2020



## Abstract

Medieval English literature is often concerned with kingship, its duties, and its effects. Writers used their texts to reflect on and respond to contemporary political issues, and debated the nature of kingship extensively. This thesis explores the development of conceptions of kingship through four case studies, each centring on a specific text or group of texts: *Beowulf*, the Alfredian Group, twelfth-century Arthurian literature, and *Havelok the Dane*. This thesis argues that ideas about kingship expressed in these texts often built on the (re-imagined) past in order to comment on present-day issues concerning rulership. As a result, narratives of kingship formed part of an on-going dialogue between these authors, their contemporary contexts, the past, and a desired future. While the Norman Conquest of 1066 resulted in significant discontinuity in cultural and political life in England, it did not provide a clean break with the pre-Conquest past. Indeed, the Anglo-Norman elite and their authors demonstrated great interest in their predecessors and in the land they had conquered. Twelfth- and thirteenth-century vernacular literature stands testament to this interest, and demonstrates continuities in notions of kingship that can be traced to pre-Conquest texts such as *Beowulf*. This thesis argues, then, that earlier conceptions of kingship did not cease to exist with the Norman Conquest; the arrival of the Normans did not constitute the implementation of a new ideal of kingship. Instead, pre-Conquest ideas about rulership were reshaped and adapted to suit new audiences, and with different aims. This thesis demonstrates that these developments emphasise the versatility of medieval English literature in reflecting on and responding to emerging and shifting narratives of kingship.

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## Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Dr. Mike Bintley and Dr. Leonie Hicks, for their guidance and unwavering support. There were many challenges in the making of this thesis, and their encouragement, advice, and seemingly infinite patience always helped me get back on track. I am also very grateful to TOEBI, who awarded me a grant allowing me to present some early findings at a conference.

I have met many lovely people in Canterbury who have supported me over the years, but special thanks go to Dean and Lily. Our pub quiz nights were always something to look forward to (even if they never featured enough rounds on medieval history!) Also apologies to both, especially Dean, for the times I had actual coffee and distracted you from your work.

I am very lucky to have had a wonderfully supportive boyfriend in Marius throughout the last year and a half of my PhD, who always made sure there were plenty of hugs and fantastic food whenever I needed them. His confidence in me and my work were a gift that cannot be matched.

Many thanks to Isabelle, my sister, whose kindness and sense of humour have been a joy. This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Rick and Caroline. They have helped and supported me in more ways than I can count, and I will be forever grateful.

## Introduction

In 1297, Edward I received a letter from his nobles detailing their grievances concerning increased taxations and demands of service from the king. The king had decided to join an expedition in Flanders to attack France, shortly after having placed significant burdens on his people for the fight in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> Edward's reply, delivered the same year, provides valuable insight into the king's conceptions of royal authority and the relationship between himself and his subjects. He opened his letter as follows:

Because the king desires always the peace and quiet and welfare of all the people of his realm and in particular desires that, after the journey he now proposes to make for the honour of God to recover his rightful heritage of which he has been more deceitfully defrauded by the king of France and for the honour and common profit of his realm, all reasons for the said peace and quiet being in any way disturbed may be completely removed,...<sup>2</sup>

Then, after discussing previous articles which he claims were not presented to him and he was therefore not aware of, he mentions the burdens he had placed on his people:

Among which articles there is mention, according to what is said, of some burdens that the king has laid on his kingdom, which he is well aware of, such as the aids that he has oftentimes asked of his people, which he has had to do because of the wars that have been waged against him in Gascony, Wales, Scotland and elsewhere, from which he could not defend either himself or his kingdom without help from his good people; wherefore it grieves him greatly that he has so burdened and so exhausted them, and he asks them to be willing to consider him excused for it as one who has laid out the things not on buying

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<sup>1</sup> Passim. Michael Prestwich, ed., "Introduction," in *Documents Illustrating the Crisis of 1297-98 in England* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980), 1–37 for an overview of the crisis and the documents relating to it.

<sup>2</sup> "Justification for Taxation 1297: Transcript," *The National Archives*, online, accessed 08-01-2020, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/magna-carta/justification-for-taxation-1297/>. TNA C 66/177.

lands or tenements or castles or towns, but on defending himself and them and all the realm.<sup>3</sup>

In the letter, Edward counters his nobles' concerns first by stating that his aim is to recover his rightful heritage, which is both to God's honour and that of his kingdom. Crucially, in the second passage he appeals to his subjects' sense of duty; he is sorry for the burdens he has placed on them, but he had no choice. As king, he makes clear, he cannot perform his duty properly without the help of his people, and if this help is not forthcoming the kingdom itself is endangered.

In this thesis I aim to trace these conceptions of kingship in literary texts against their historical background through three guiding questions: Firstly, how did English authors from the early to the later Middle Ages approach and respond to ideas about kingship? Secondly, how did ideas about kingship evolve from earlier texts to later texts? Finally, how influential was the contemporary political landscape, both in England and on the Continent? My discussion will show that authors in medieval England addressed ideas about kingship in a variety of ways, and with a variety of aims, reflecting on and responding to their historical and political contexts. Their narratives, however, show clear developments in notions of kingship. The reciprocal relationship between a king and his subjects, the idea that both the king and his people have clearly delineated roles to play in the kingdom's well-being, is a recurrent theme in the texts under discussion. Indeed, in the letter cited above, Edward I builds on ideas about kingship that had been discussed, shaped, and adapted for many centuries. Vernacular literature played an important, and surprisingly often overlooked, role in the shaping of political thought: it was the vehicle with which ideas about kings and their authority were examined, reshaped, and redefined, before being passed on to influence a next generation of writers. Laura Ashe has referred to the 'dual nature' of these texts, as they are "consciously and unconsciously shaped entities, both distinct from historical reality and yet a part of it."<sup>4</sup> Conceptions of kingship in literature, then, are not static, but evolved through continuous dialogue with their historical and political contexts, as authors continued to redefine and reinterpret kingship.

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<sup>3</sup> "Justification for Taxation 1297,"

<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/magna-carta/justification-for-taxation-1297/>. TNA C 66/177.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Ashe, *Fiction and History in England, 1066–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 2.



This explanation also suggests an answer to the last of my research questions, concerning the political and historical context of these texts, both in England and on the Continent. Vernacular literature in England found itself in an ongoing dialogue not only with the past, but also with other countries and other literary traditions, and therefore with other ways of thinking about kingship and power. The three research questions, then, are closely connected. This thesis will show that medieval literary narratives about kingship did not exist in a vacuum, and that their contemporary political contexts, both at home and abroad, were very influential in their development.

### **Overview of Recent Scholarship**

Notions of medieval kingship have been studied extensively by scholars, both in historical and literary contexts. Barbara Yorke's study of the early English kingdoms has provided important insights into the development and strategies of these kingdoms and their rulers.<sup>5</sup> George Molyneaux has considered the formation of the English kingdom in the tenth century. Discussing the geographical area ruled by the Cerdicings, the ancestors of Alfred the Great, their subjects, and administrative changes in the tenth century, Molyneaux has argued that it is probably due to Cnut's conquest that England became defined as a 'definite geographical unit.'<sup>6</sup> A sense of Englishness was, however, already promoted by the Alfredian texts, as I will discuss in chapter two. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that, as Patrick Wormald has noted, while Alfred may have seen himself as king of the English, there is hardly any evidence to suggest people beyond the borders of Wessex agreed with him.<sup>7</sup> This argument is important for the second chapter, as it suggests that the Alfredian texts discussed there aimed to promote such unity and cooperation which was felt to be lacking. Concerning Alfred himself, Richard Abels has contributed significantly to debates on the king's political contexts and influences,<sup>8</sup> and Ryan Lavelle's study of Alfred's wars has made considerable contributions to the

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> George Molyneaux, *The Formation of the English Kingdom in the Tenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Wormald, "The Making of England", *History Today* 45.2. (1995): 26.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Longman, 1998).

discussion of the king's dealings with the Vikings, amongst others.<sup>9</sup> These two studies are important for this thesis for the historical context they provide to Alfred's personal circumstances and decision-making. Connecting Alfred to his post-Conquest successors, Pauline Stafford's work has been significant for an understanding of political history in the tenth and eleventh centuries, exploring the effects of the slow process of unification of the English kingdoms and its subsequent conquest by William the Conqueror.<sup>10</sup>

Pre-Conquest kingship and power in literature has also received a substantial amount of attention, which is hardly surprising when we consider the extent to which early medieval literature is concerned with lordship. Andy Orchard's work has been important in furthering an understanding of the poem's underlying themes.<sup>11</sup> Orchard has highlighted *Beowulf's* circularity, which connects Scyld and Beowulf, the poem's first and final kings. This connection, I will suggest, shows the poet's interest in a king's position in his dynasty, and the accordingly differing duties a king needs to fulfil. In addition, Scott Gwara has discussed heroic identity in *Beowulf* and its connections to kingship and religion in the poem.<sup>12</sup> I will argue that Gwara's reading of Beowulf as a 'morally ambiguous' king,<sup>13</sup> who behaves unpredictably, fails to take into account Beowulf's past. Rather than being ambiguous, the poet is very clear that at the end of his life Beowulf's decisions are based on his past as a hero. Leo Carruthers has emphasised the importance of the king's duty to protect his people. He has linked this duty to *Beowulf's* symbols, such as the hall from which the king distributes gifts, symbolising peace and prosperity, and specifically the giving of gold rings, which is "a symbol of the union between the ruler and his people."<sup>14</sup> This union, and by extension its symbols, are an important component of my discussion of *Beowulf*, as I argue for the underlying and continuous significance of a mutually beneficial relationship between a lord and his subjects. In addition to this relationship I will also examine the poet's depiction of royal successions. Michael Drout's work has contributed significantly to my argument here,

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<sup>9</sup> Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred's Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest. A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Scott Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 53.

<sup>14</sup> Leo Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism in *Beowulf*", *Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature*, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 19–21.

especially his identification of two types of inheritance in pre-Conquest England: inheritance by blood and inheritance by deeds. Ideally, Drout argues, a ruler has earned his throne both through deeds and by being the son of a king.<sup>15</sup> The *Beowulf* poet explores this system, with its variations and possible outcomes for the kingdom and the royal dynasty.

Regarding the texts of the Alfredian Group, much work has been done by Janet Bately, Malcolm Godden, and Susan Irvine. Bately's work on the attributions of Alfredian texts to the king himself,<sup>16</sup> and Godden's notes of caution in this regard, have renewed debate on Alfred's own involvement and the extent to which he was behind the movement from a position of central authority.<sup>17</sup> As a result, I argue for a group of texts emanating from a court which encouraged a renewed interest in learning and in thinking about kingship. Irvine's work on the Alfredian prefaces and epilogues has provided new insights into the complexities presented by the texts in the Alfredian Group, arguing for their importance for our understanding of the production and reception of vernacular literature in the ninth century.<sup>18</sup>

One of the aims in this thesis is to demonstrate a sense of continuity between pre-Conquest and post-Conquest kingship in literature, and in this regard Elaine Treharne's work has been influential.<sup>19</sup> Treharne has argued that, contrary to previous suggestions, English literature did not die with the Conquest. This argument is of paramount importance for this thesis, and I extend it to argue that ideas about kingship did not die with the Conquest either, and continued to be expressed in vernacular literature. This continuity is related to the discussion around English identity after the Conquest. Laura Ashe has noted that Englishness was not necessarily related to the English language: post-Conquest literature could express its English identity through French.<sup>20</sup> While I discuss few French texts in this thesis, Wace's *Brut* is relevant to this notion, as it aims to navigate

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<sup>15</sup> Michael C. Drout, "Blood and Deeds: The Inheritance Systems in *Beowulf*", *Studies in Philology* 104.2 (Spring 2007): 202.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Bately, "Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything? The Integrity of the Alfredian Canon Revisited," *Medium Aevum* 78.2. (2009): 189–215.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Godden, "Did King Alfred Write Anything?", *Medium Aevum* 76.1 (2007): 1–23.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Irvine, "The Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues", in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 143–170.

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Treharne, *Living through Conquest: the Politics of Early English, 1020–1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Ashe, *Fiction and History*, 9.

this identity. Ann Williams' work has highlighted the importance of those of middling rank in this regard, and her work has provided an important analysis of the Conquest's effects on the lesser landowners and lower nobility. Importantly for this thesis, she has argued that this English identity arose sooner for families of middling rank than upper nobility, as there was probably more intermarriage between Norman and English families.<sup>21</sup> This matters because, as Ashe has suggested, the royal court as an audience of post-Conquest literature has been exaggerated; the aristocratic audience became much more important.<sup>22</sup> Regarding kingship in post-Conquest England, Robert Bartlett's work on the rule of the Normans and Angevins has been important due to its focus on political narratives, and exploration of the connections between the ruling class and wider society.<sup>23</sup> He has emphasised the role of the king's advisers and the assembly when important decisions had to be made. For example, Henry I's failure to ask his counsel's consent for marrying his daughter Matilda to Geoffrey of Anjou caused resentment, which contributed to the Civil War between Matilda and Stephen after his death. This Civil War in turn instigated much comment in literary texts, including the twelfth-century Arthurian literature I will discuss. More specifically, Judith Green's work on the reign of Henry I has provided valuable insights into the king's skilful negotiation and consolidation of power in the first decades after the Conquest. After much conflict, Henry successfully seized Normandy from his older brother, Robert Curthose. Unsurprisingly, the king's many political struggles, and his reunification of Normandy and England, impressed many contemporary writers. Crucially, Green also comments on Henry's contemporary image as a king closely concerned with the administration of justice, and mentions "the king's commitment to maintain the laws of King Edward."<sup>24</sup> This commitment corresponds to the role of the law in Arthurian literature, which emphasises the importance of maintaining the ancient laws of the land. Indeed, Henry had promised to maintain good laws at his coronation, an oath which Green suggests the king seems to

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<sup>21</sup> Ann Williams, *The English and the Norman Conquest* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Ashe, *Fiction and History*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1220* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Judith Green, *Henry I: King of England and Duke of Normandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 114–117.

have taken seriously.<sup>25</sup> The Norman and Angevin elite also contributed to a more international outlook. Elizabeth Salter has shown the significance of international connections at this time, arguing that twelfth-century culture was one of “international exchange,”<sup>26</sup> in which the relatively new political establishment in England sought to connect to “a newly acquired past.”<sup>27</sup> This argument is central especially to the third chapter, and I will argue that Arthurian literature was used to position this ‘new past’ into a narrative that supported the Norman and Angevin regimes. Regarding Plantagenet England, the work of Michael Prestwich is significant, specifically his work on Edward I.<sup>28</sup> His portrayal of the king demonstrates intriguing similarities between Edward and the eponymous king of *Havelok the Dane*, as I will argue in chapter four.

Concerning post-Conquest literature, Nicholas Higham has discussed the twelfth-century rise of Arthurian literature in the light of these historical events and kings.<sup>29</sup> Crucially, Higham has shown the extent to which the figure of Arthur was adaptable, and he traces the king’s history as a character in literary texts. Françoise Le Saux has discussed the Matter of Britain and the various versions of King Arthur’s story, and has shown how the greatly varied audiences influenced perceptions of the legendary king.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Judith Weiss’ work on Wace, who provided a French poetic version of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia*, has been important for a discussion of Arthur’s character and its development. Weiss has positioned Wace’s *Brut* as ‘ambivalent,’<sup>31</sup> a middle-point between the epic style and twelfth-century romance.<sup>32</sup> While I largely agree with Weiss’

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Green, *The Government of England under Henry I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 6.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Salter, *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Salter, *English and International*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Prestwich, *Plantagenet England: 1225–1360* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005) and *Edward I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

<sup>29</sup> N.J. Higham, *King Arthur: Mythmaking and History* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Françoise Le Saux, “The Reception of the Matter of Britain in Thirteenth-Century England: A Study of Some Anglo-Norman Manuscripts of Wace’s *Roman de Brut*”, *Thirteenth Century England X: Proceedings of the Durham Conference, 2003*, ed. Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell and Robin Frame (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), 131–145.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Weiss, “Wace to Layamon via Waldef”, in *Reading Layamon’s Brut: Approaches and Explorations*, ed. Rosamund Allen, Jane Roberts, and Carole Weinberg (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2013), 547.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Weiss, *Wace’s Roman de Brut: A History of the British. Text and Translation* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010).

assessment, I will suggest that Wace's depiction of kingship is not so much ambivalent, but rather marries seemingly conflicting characteristics of good rulership. The notions of kingship found in these Arthurian texts, also find their way into thirteenth-century literature, discussed in chapter four. The central text of this chapter, *Havelok the Dane*, is arguably the most contested when it comes to its aims and audience. Christopher Stuart has connected the poem's eponymous hero to Edward I, and argues for the poem as a defence of the king's reassertion of his authority.<sup>33</sup> Thorlac Turville-Petre, however, has suggested a connection with King Cnut, and proposes that the poem deals with the past, specifically Eadric's treachery of Edmund Ironside.<sup>34</sup> Yet another interpretation comes from Dominique Battles, who has argued that in fact *Havelok* is a commentary on the Norman Conquest.<sup>35</sup> Battles has noted a strong link between *Havelok* and Hereward the Wake, and has argued that the names Athelwold and Goldeboru, the English king and his daughter, can be connected to Peterborough Abbey, and thus provides a narrative of rebellion against William the Conqueror.<sup>36</sup> I will argue that these interpretations are not as contradictory as they may appear: they represent different stages in the re-telling of *Havelok*, demonstrating once more how stories can be re-interpreted and readapted to suit different needs and narratives.

This discussion gives only a brief impression of more recent research concerning conceptions of kingship before and after the Norman Conquest. However, while the subject itself has sparked considerable interest, the notes above also hint at the lack of a study that traces these notions without interpreting the Conquest as a watershed moment. Indeed, it is this gap that this thesis intends to fill; as Treharne has pointed out, literary output continued, and so did thinking and writing about kingship. Thus, my research questions as formulated above are intended to bridge the gap between research into pre-Conquest and post-Conquest literature. It should be noted that I do not suggest that the Norman Conquest did not precipitate significant change. Rather, this study's contribution lies in its rejection of the Conquest as a definite cut-off point, after which ideas about kingship had to be reintroduced and reinvented. The Norman regime's interest in their

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<sup>33</sup> Christopher Stuart, "Havelok the Dane and Edward I in the 1290s", *Studies in Philology* 93.4. (Autumn 1996): 349–464.

<sup>34</sup> Turville-Petre, "Havelok and the History of the Nation", in *Readings in Medieval Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 132.

<sup>35</sup> Dominique Battles, "Reconquering England for the English in *Havelok the Dane*", *The Chaucer Review* 47.2 (2012): 187–205.

<sup>36</sup> Battles, "Reconquering England", 189–195.

predecessors is well-documented and uncontroversial, but is taken no further than an interest in pre-Conquest law and history. My four case studies demonstrate that an interest in conceptions of kingship can and should be added to this list. This interest expressed itself through a concern with the law and England's history, but it is, crucially, the history of the *land* rather than that of the peoples that inhabited it that so intrigued Norman and Angevin writers and their audiences. Thus, this thesis demonstrates that literature depicting kingship in the eleventh and twelfth century shows both continuity and discontinuity, by engaging in new and imaginative ways of (re-)imagining the past. Continuity in ideas about kingship, therefore, was not an accident, but a *conscious decision* of the Norman and Angevin authors to position themselves into the historical framework of the land that they had conquered. Today, as societies all over the world rethink and consider the meaning of good leadership, the relationship between a ruler and subjects, and the role of texts in reflecting and challenging those in power, a study into how medieval authors navigated similar concerns at times of political turbulence does not seem out of place.

There are several themes that have emerged in recent scholarship which are relevant for this study. These themes run through the following chapters, and as such I will briefly introduce them here. First of all, a consideration of the authors' authorial voice and the reception of their texts is crucial for our understanding of the texts discussed here. For instance, Chapter 1 will take into account the complex history of *Beowulf*, both as a poem and as a manuscript. As John Niles has noted, the poem has many messages, sometimes even contrary ones,<sup>37</sup> which raises questions about the author's intentions and audience(s). Several of the texts under discussion in the third chapter, on the other hand, were dedicated (and adapted) to a royal audience, and in the case of his *Roman de Brut* Wace shows his intention of making the history of the Britons (and most notably the history of King Arthur) available to a wider audience, by translating the Latin of Geoffrey of Monmouth into French. This was important, as Wace's wider aim was to connect the Plantagenet dynasty (most specifically Henry II) to the history of the country that had recently come into their possession. Indeed, Christopher Berard speaks of an 'Angevization' of Arthur, and notes how Arthur's kingship is depicted as that of Henry

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<sup>37</sup> John D. Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 15.

II.<sup>38</sup> The Alfredian texts, discussed in Chapter 2, are very different in this respect. Here, the authorial voice is often overtly present, particularly in the prefaces. The preface to the Old English *Pastoral Care*, for instance, uses the voice of King Alfred himself. While there has been considerable debate about whether Alfred himself actually wrote any of these texts, which I will discuss further in the chapter, it is important to note here that the king's voice lends authority to the text, and that the audience is therefore expected to give its contents due consideration.

Secondly, perceptions of kingship are shaped by cultural memory. As Patrick Geary has noted, those who had access to the past (its events, its people) could influence contemporary views of the past and direct present narratives:

The right to speak the past also implied control over that which gave access to the past — the 'relics' by which the past continued to live into the present. How these tangible or written relics of the past were preserved, who preserved them, and who could therefore make them to disappear were thus fundamental aspects of power and authority.<sup>39</sup>

The writer who writes about the past, then, holds a position of authority. Indeed, all of the texts in this study portray past kingship: (re)shaping contemporary narratives of kingship prompted medieval writers to make use of and redirect a shared cultural memory. Its potential was significant: a past could provide an institution, idea, or individual with legitimacy and power, as Lambert and Weiler have noted.<sup>40</sup> By invoking a (distant) past from a shared cultural memory, concerns about the present could be introduced and discussed more safely.<sup>41</sup> We can see this theme at work in all chapters, but perhaps most overtly in Chapters 3 and 4, where the pre-Conquest past is invoked and reimagined in order raise contemporary concerns.

Another important element is the role played by masculinity in portrayals of medieval kingship. To what extent did contemporary ideas of ideal manly behaviour

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher Michael Berard, *Arthurianism in Early Plantagenet England: From Henry II to Edward I* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), 43.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Lambert and Björn Weiler, *How the Past was Used: Historical Cultures c. 750–2000*, ed. Peter Lambert and Björn Weiler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 48.

<sup>41</sup> Lambert and Weiler, *How the Past was Used*, 48.



influence notions of kingship? Considering the later Middle Ages, Katherine Lewis has noted that ideal gender behaviour was discussed prescriptively in texts, which suggests that this behaviour could and should be “nurtured and trained.”<sup>42</sup> These *Mirrors for Princes*, however, only emerged in late medieval England. Additionally, Chris Fletcher has noted that before the eighteenth century there was no word for ‘masculinity’; rather, the term ‘manhood’ was used, and although this has often been used as an equivalent term, Fletcher argues that it is in fact different. Indeed, manhood, unlike masculinity, is less closely connected to sexuality. It is about “strength, vigour, steadfastness, and a certain kind of concern with status and honour, including largesse and conspicuous expenditure.”<sup>43</sup> This concern with a man’s strength and vigour is particularly relevant to our understanding of medieval kingship and the way this is portrayed in literature, and therefore informs this thesis’ discussion of kingship.

Finally, as this thesis takes in both Old English and Middle English literature, some comments need to be made about literary continuity. In addition to Elaine Treharne, who has shown that English literature did not die with the Conquest, as mentioned above, Mark Faulkner has argued that “it is clear that the view that the twelfth century represents a hiatus or rupture in English literary history is untenable.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, this does not mean that the role of Old English did not change. As Chris Jones has noted, while Old English continued to be used, late twelfth-century manuscripts show that it was less well understood. In other words, “pre-Conquest English was gradually becoming ‘Old’ English.”<sup>45</sup> What matters most here, then, is the continued interest in Old English and its historical contexts. All of the texts discussed in this thesis are interested in the past, and the final two chapters in particular concern texts that reconstruct pre-Conquest pasts. This thesis, then, does not see a clear cut-off point for the use of Old English and its historical contexts, nor does it present the case for straightforward continuity. Rather, the case

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<sup>42</sup> Katherine J. Lewis, *Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England* (London: Routledge, 2013), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Fletcher, “The Whig Interpretation of Masculinity? Honour and Sexuality in Late Medieval Manhood”, in *What is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World*, ed. John H. Arnold and Sean Brady (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 62.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Faulkner, “Archaism, Belatedness and Modernisation: ‘Old’ English in the Twelfth Century”, *The Review of English Studies* 63 (2012): 182.

<sup>45</sup> Chris Jones, “Old English after 1066”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), ed. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 315.

studies demonstrate how the past and the present are connected through a continuous process in which the past is reshaped and reimagined. This interplay between past and present, between Old English and Middle English, will become visible in all of the texts under discussion.

### **Methodology and outline of the chapters**

I will approach my research questions through four case studies, one chapter each, with a scope that reaches from the eighth century to the thirteenth century. Tracing developments in literature and its historical context requires careful consideration of the texts to be included and excluded: selecting not enough (or the wrong) texts will result in a superficial analysis that cannot properly answer the research questions, and selecting too many texts may lead to a profusion of examples which may only share a tenuous link to the discussion and cannot be given the attention they each deserve. The use of case studies allows for an in-depth analysis of the texts involved, while not ignoring the extent and variety of medieval English writing concerned with kingship. In addition, it allows for more specific comparisons to be made between these texts, taking into account their wider historical context. My four case studies each focus on a different period of medieval literature with a selection of (mostly vernacular) literary texts at its centre. This method allows for a careful examination of the interplay between text and historical context, by taking into account the major historical events that affected the period's literary output, as well as allowing for consideration of the complexities surrounding the texts, some of which I have already outlined above. The focus in each chapter lies on vernacular literature, that is, texts in either Old English or Middle English. However, in some cases Latin texts will also be considered. I have chosen to include Latin texts where they provide relevant contexts or have been an important source for the vernacular text under discussion. For instance, in Chapter 1 I have included references to Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, as it both contextualises pre-Conquest notions of kingship and greatly influenced medieval writers. In Chapter 2 I refer to Asser's biography of King Alfred, the *Vita Alfredi*. Again, Asser's text gives us important insights into Alfredian kingship and the way Alfred wished to be seen and remembered, and will thus be referred when it can provide important context. Chapter 3 contains the most comprehensive discussion of a non-vernacular text, but for good reason: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* not only established King Arthur as an example of good kingship, but also

directly influenced Wace's *Brut*,<sup>46</sup> which in turn led to Layamon's Middle English poem. A discussion of Geoffrey's text, then, is crucial for the study of both Wace's and Layamon's poems, as it allows us to consider the development of Arthur as exemplary king and demonstrates his adaptability for different times, purposes, and audiences.

In brief, the methodology reflects the aims of this research: The four case studies will consider a selection of literary works from a specific period and in each I will explore the ways in which kings are portrayed, and how and why authors comment (whether directly or indirectly) on the behaviour of these rulers. I will examine these texts in their historical contexts, historicising them in order to gain insight into how the texts mirror and comment on the events and opinions of their day. These views will be measured against the representations of kings in other, more historical, sources. To conclude, I will discuss (based on the previous discussions of literary texts) how ideas about kingship in England evolved before and after the Norman Conquest, thereby answering the three questions at the heart of this study.

The first chapter explores *Beowulf*, a poem fundamentally concerned with kings, their dynasties, and their decisions. Lordship was a crucial element in the well-being of early medieval kingdoms. As Eric Stanley has noted: "The fear of the Anglo-Saxons was lordlessness and unsettled times of usurpation and the deposition and expulsion or murder of rightful and unrightful kings."<sup>47</sup> It is, therefore, not very surprising that kingship is at the heart of *Beowulf*, and that the poem and its three 'good' kings Scyld, Hrothgar, and Beowulf have received substantial scholarly attention. I will discuss each of these three kings in turn, and consider how the poet depicts their reigns. I will argue that the poet does not put forward one clear vision of kingship, but rather aims to identify its complexities. Good kingship, the poet informs us, is not a static concept: it can be adapted to the needs of a people at a particular moment in time. I also suggest that the concept of 'wyrd,' referring to potential future events, is important in this context: no matter how good a king may be at protecting his people, no matter how strong, a king is a human being who operates within limits. A good king cannot always protect his people if the circumstances are against him —as in the case of Hrothgar who, despite being a good

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<sup>46</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 3, Wace positioned his poem as a translation of Geoffrey's text, although he made significant changes.

<sup>47</sup> Eric Stanley, "Beowulf: Lordlessness in Ancient Times Is the Theme, as Much as the Glory of Kings, if not More", *Notes and Queries* 52.3 (September 2005): 267. All these elements occur in the poem, and the poet repeatedly expressed the tension surrounding successions, as Stanley has argued.

king, finds himself powerless against Grendel's attacks. The most significant characteristic of good kingship in *Beowulf* is wisdom. It is wisdom, specifically knowledge of the past and the ability to look ahead to the future, which allows a king to face potential tragedies with dignity and resignation, and protects from pride and arrogance. In the end, then, I will demonstrate that the three 'good kings' in *Beowulf* are not good because they all possess the same static qualities of good kingship, but because they all performed their roles according to the stage at which their dynasty found itself. Crucially, I do not argue that these kings are perfect —the case of Beowulf's own reign itself will make this clear. However, what makes them 'good kings' is that they each attempted to do the best they could according to the circumstances they faced.

Chapter two explores literature associated with King Alfred (r. 871-899). I will argue that the texts under consideration here together show how Alfred's reign marked a turning point, a moment in which existing ideas about kingship were adapted into a new framework of royal authority. Specifically, this new image presents the king not just in his traditional, secular, role of protector, but extends this to include religious and scholarly duties. The Alfredian texts discussed in this chapter have in common that they are all seen as emanating from the educational programme initiated at Alfred's court, and that they all demonstrate conceptions of kingship, illustrating how Alfredian writing incorporated older ideals into a new narrative befitting ninth-century Wessex' political context. The first text, the *Pastoral Care*, makes this adaptation clear. The text is presented as a tool against the decayed state of learning Alfred perceived in his kingdom, and the king is cast into the role of teacher. This is a departure from the Carolingian model inspired by Charlemagne, who emphasised the importance of knowledge, but did not comment on the ways in which it ought to be taught.<sup>48</sup> Crucially, the *Pastoral Care* presents Alfred also as a teacher to the clergy. Thus, while the text itself is a mostly faithful translation of Pope Gregory's *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*, taken together with its preface it shows an assumption of ecclesiastical authority by the king. The Old English *Boethius*, a translation of Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, is also concerned with wisdom. Wisdom, however, is not an end in itself, but a tool with which a king can establish and maintain good relationships with his people. The main characters in the Latin original, Boethius and King Theodoric, become examples of good and bad leadership respectively, and are

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<sup>48</sup> Janet L. Nelson, "Charlemagne the Man", in *Charlemagne: Empire and Society*, ed. Joanna Story (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 35.

used to demonstrate the importance of mutual dependency between king and subjects. The *Soliloquies*, a translation of Augustine's *Soliloquia*, is also concerned with this relationship between a ruler and his people, and more specifically with social order. I will argue that the original text, contemplative and spiritual, is developed into an active call to action and appeal for cooperation. The study of sources, especially in this chapter, thus depends on the original versions of the particular texts. The *Consolatione* already contained references to rulers; while the translator did add an important passage on the tools needed by a king, a study of some of the translated passages shows why Alfred's circle would have been interested in the text in the first place. The *Soliloquia*, on the other hand, is changed substantially from a spiritual text into one fit for an active king, as mentioned above. In this case, then, a study of the translator's additions is more fruitful. Alfred's law-code, compiled towards the end of the king's reign, aims to increase the king's authority by positioning it into a framework of both Christian and secular legal writing. Michael Treschow has argued that the code itself is indistinctive, as it follows legal precedent.<sup>49</sup> Wormald, on the other hand, has argued that it was original propaganda.<sup>50</sup> I will argue that the code is not merely traditional, nor can it be dismissed as a piece of propaganda. The law-code is versatile, as are the other texts discussed in this chapter: Alfredian literature adapts existing structures and ideas into a new framework, answering to the demands and needs of ninth-century Wessex. The final text I will discuss in this chapter is the Old English Psalms. I will suggest that the Psalms were intended to be for both public and personal use. The Psalmist positions Alfredian Wessex as the new Israel by transporting Old Testament troubles to his own times, while at the same time King David is presented as a king very similar to Alfred himself. Together, these texts demonstrate a clear sense of Alfredian kingship; a kingship in which older elements such as the relationship between lord and subjects, as encountered in *Beowulf*, are reinterpreted into a Christian framework. The texts working within this framework are, above all, versatile, weaving together ideas and narratives that the authors felt suited the demands of ninth-century Wessex and its king, Alfred.

The third chapter explores the representation of King Arthur in three twelfth-century texts: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Wace's *Roman de*

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Treschow, "The Prologue to Alfred's Law Code: Instruction in the Spirit of Mercy", *Florilegium* 13 (1994): 79–110.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century. Vol. 1: Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 284.

*Brut*, and Layamon's *Brut*. In this chapter I trace the development of Arthur's story and its concerns with kingship, and argue that each text presents a vision of past rulership firmly rooted in its own twelfth-century political context. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* presents an Arthur who combines generosity and courage. I will argue that Geoffrey intended to improve the image of the Welsh and, by looking back to a reimagined pre-Conquest Britain, gave the Welsh an important and positive position within the narrative of Britain's past. Arthur himself becomes the symbol of this unity between Anglo-Normans and Welsh, and of the need for cooperation. Wace's *Brut* aimed to inform the new rulers, the Angevins, about their kingdom and to provide them with examples of good rulership. Wace's poem marks a transition between pre-Conquest ideas about kingship and courtly ideals. His Arthur, I will suggest, exemplifies the importance of moderate and sensible behaviour in a king. Layamon's *Brut* is concerned with England's, rather than Britain's, political history. I will argue that the *Brut* marks an important shift from Geoffrey's and Wace's works, in establishing a firm connection between kingship and the land. Layamon's conscious reimagination of a pre-Conquest England is noticeable in his portrayal of Arthur as an imperfect ruler, reminiscent of Beowulf. Kingship for Layamon is like a guardianship, in which the king functions as the protector of land and law, two elements which are intricately connected. The importance of the law for a kingdom's stability is developed further in *Havelok the Dane*.

The final chapter discusses *Havelok the Dane*, a text which, I will suggest, shows many similar concerns to *Beowulf*, but also demonstrates how thinking about kingship had changed and adapted to contemporary concerns about royal authority. For instance, financial difficulties and more complicated legal and administrative systems had shifted the interpretations of a king's duties towards his people. The *Havelok* poet continues and expands on the importance of law and land as seen in Layamon's *Brut*. Most importantly, however, *Havelok* shows how narratives could be adapted and reinterpreted, arguably better than any other text in this study. I will argue that different interpretations of the poem's aims (commentary on the reign of Edward I, a literary rebellion against the Norman rulers, a way to promote unity between Danes and English) are not actually incompatible, but rather form part of the rich tapestry that is the life of a narrative; *Havelok* does not provide a historical context, but rather multiple contexts, with the thirteenth-century Middle English version displaying remnants of earlier interpretations. The poet's changes and additions, such as the increased role of Goldeboru and the

importance of the law demonstrate, I will argue, a concern with royal authority during a politically turbulent time, and provide a justification of Edward I's decisions.

The elements of good kingship in Edward I's justification (his desire for peace and prosperity for his people, his duty to protect them), can be identified in all of the case studies. For instance, protecting the nation was seen as an important feature of kingship throughout the whole period under scrutiny here. Nonetheless, I will argue that the exact ways in which a king was expected to fulfil this duty changed. The view of 'royal protection' shifted from a focus on military protection (against outside dangers such as invaders) to a more legalistic interpretation (e.g. ensuring that laws were adhered to, and an interpretation of the king as guardian of the law). In other words, in vernacular literature, the king's task of protecting his people changed from a mainly outward-looking notion, identifying danger outside of the ruler's realm, to a more inward-looking notion, where danger to the kingdom's stability is identified as coming from within. I use the words 'mainly' and 'more' very deliberately here; I do not claim that military protection disappeared in later texts, nor that kings did not concern themselves with the law in earlier ones. Indeed, pre-Conquest England was very much concerned with the relationship between law and rulership, as shown by the period's law-codes.<sup>51</sup>

In brief, then, the texts I will discuss are testament to the versatility and vitality of England's medieval vernacular literature. *Beowulf*, The Alfredian Group, the Arthurian stories, and *Havelok the Dane* are not merely products of their time, reflecting conceptions of kingship and absorbing these into their narrative frameworks; such an assessment denies these texts their active role in shaping narratives and interpreting their cultural, historical, and political contexts. This narrative flexibility results in a discussion of texts separated by several centuries and the Norman Conquest, which nevertheless demonstrate striking similarities in notions of kingship.

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<sup>51</sup> Pauline Stafford, "The Laws of Cnut and the History of Anglo-Saxon Royal Promises", *Anglo-Saxon England* 10 (1982 for 1981): 173–190.

# Chapter 1: *Beowulf*

## 1.1. Introduction

In this first chapter I will examine the depiction of royal authority in *Beowulf*. I will argue that the poet presents the complexities of kingship by emphasising that a ruler's abilities are always limited by his particular circumstances. To that end, I will consider the three kings who gain the designation of 'good king,' namely Scyld, Hrothgar, and Beowulf. These three kings become king at different stages of their dynasty's existence, and as such can provide valuable insight into the poet's conception of kingship and the ways its power is limited by external circumstances.

In addition, I will also consider the poems *Widsith*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wanderer*, as well as the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. A special role is reserved for Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. Finished around 731, Bede's (mostly chronological) history presents a picture of English kingdoms and their kings in the early years of their formation, and thus provides valuable information about his conception of royal authority, especially when it crossed paths, as it inevitably and often did, with ecclesiastical authority.<sup>52</sup> Bede's work was popular throughout the Middle Ages. Indeed, his popularity was especially notable among the Carolingians,<sup>53</sup> who were responsible for copying his work and eventually for its reintroduction in England in the ninth century.<sup>54</sup> The *Historia* yields significant insights into contemporary ideas on kingship, especially related to the conversion of the English. In particular, I will discuss the depictions of Oswald and Edwin in the *Historia* to

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<sup>52</sup> As James Campbell has pointed out, Bede may have been the son of an aristocrat, his *Historia* was dedicated to King Ceolwulf, who was also sent a draft version, and was acquainted with Egbert, bishop of York and cousin of Ceolwulf. As such, "he was near to a circle of men in power." James Campbell, "Secular and Political Contexts", in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 25. These relationships with powerful men will undoubtedly have shaped Bede's writing about rulership.

<sup>53</sup> It was probably introduced to the court of Charlemagne via Alcuin. A version of Bede's *Historia* "was almost certainly in Charlemagne's court library at Aachen by sometime around 800." Joshua A. Westgard, "Bede and the continent in the Carolingian age and beyond", in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 204.

<sup>54</sup> Westgard, "Bede and the continent", 201–202.



contextualise the conceptions of royal power that emerge in *Beowulf*. I will here use Bede's original Latin work rather than the Old English version. The Old English translation, dated by Sharon M. Rowley to between 883 and 930,<sup>55</sup> adds little (and indeed omits much) compared to the Latin original.<sup>56</sup> As such, it is the original Latin version which is relevant to the period under discussion here. While aspects of these texts have often been debated in relation to *Beowulf*, I am not aware of a discussion that looks at all of them together, in order to come to a better understanding of ideas on royal authority in early medieval English literature. In addition, as far as I know they have not been considered in the context of continuity (and discontinuity) of these ideas in later pre-Conquest and post-Conquest England.<sup>57</sup>

*Beowulf*'s date of composition and manuscript context, and that of the texts mentioned above, are also important considerations here. *Beowulf*'s survival, and that of the manuscript in which it is preserved, is somewhat of a miracle, and probably accidental.<sup>58</sup> The other texts in the manuscript—known as the Nowell codex, after the sixteenth-century antiquary who left his name in the manuscript—have all been translated into Old English from Latin. They are a poetic version of the Old Testament story of Judith, *the Wonders of the East*, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, and a *Life* of St Christopher. The manuscript “was copied by two scribes, probably in the decade after 1000, in a monastic center somewhere in the south of England.”<sup>59</sup> The date of composition, however, has been a notorious point of contention. As Hildegard Tristram has noted, “the material culture depicted is that of the late 6th and early 7th century North

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<sup>55</sup> Sharon M. Rowley, “Bede in later Anglo-Saxon England,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bede*, ed. Scott DeGregorio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 221.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, George Molyneux, “The Old English Bede: English Ideology or Christian Instruction?,” *English Historical Review* 124 (Dec. 2009): 1291.

<sup>57</sup> Elaine Treharne is a notable exception. While her book *Living through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020–1220* is not directly centred on the notion of kingship or its continuities and discontinuities, her work is important as she demonstrates that literature and literary culture did not die with the Conquest. See footnote 19 above.

<sup>58</sup> Roy M. Liuzza, *Beowulf: A new verse translation* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press Ltd., 2000), 11.

<sup>59</sup> Liuzza, *Beowulf*, 11.

Sea peoples,”<sup>60</sup> and some of the poem’s events can be dated to the sixth century.<sup>61</sup> This opens up intriguing questions about the poem’s original aim and audience, as dynasties and kingdoms began to be established in the east of Britain around 600.<sup>62</sup> Sam Newton, for instance, has suggested that *Beowulf* was perhaps composed “in an Anglian kingdom during the eighth century,”<sup>63</sup> and that it used “Danish dynastic legend which had been fostered in the Wuffing kingdom of East Anglia.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, *Beowulf* would then have served a royal audience keen to demonstrate its genealogical links to the Danish royal dynasty presented in the poem. John Niles, however, has approached the poem in a different way. He asks: “what are the cultural questions to which *Beowulf* is an answer?”<sup>65</sup> He argues that *Beowulf* does not reflect a specific group of people nor a specific set of heroic values. Instead, Niles emphasises that “Rather than reflecting the static conditions of a single or simple age, *Beowulf* represents a broad collective response to changes that affected a complex society during a period of major transformations.”<sup>66</sup> The poem, then, contains many voices at once, and as such does not have one clearly defined audience.

Most recent scholarship suggests that the poem’s composition is likely to have been early, more specifically sometime during the eighth century.<sup>67</sup> As such, this is the approximate date I have adopted here. This means that *Beowulf* likely belongs to the same

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<sup>60</sup> Hildegard L.C. Tristram, “What’s the Point of Dating ‘Beowulf’?”, in *Medieval Insular Literature Between the Oral and the Written II*, ed. Hildegard L.C. Tristram (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1997), 80.

<sup>61</sup> Tristram, “Dating ‘Beowulf’”, 66.

<sup>62</sup> Barbara Yorke, “Kings and Kingship,” in *A companion to the early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c.500–c.1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 76.

<sup>63</sup> Sam Newton, “*Beowulf* and the East Anglian Royal Pedigree”, in *The Age of Sutton Hoo, The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1992), 65.

<sup>64</sup> Newton, “*Beowulf*”, 74.

<sup>65</sup> Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Niles, *Old English Heroic Poems*, 14–15.

<sup>67</sup> For a comprehensive study, see Leonard Neidorf, ed., *The Dating of Beowulf: a reassessment* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014). Neidorf’s introduction gives a clear overview of scholarship on the issue and methodologies used to arrive at any conclusion regarding the poem’s dating. See also R.D. Fulk, who concludes that “*Beowulf* almost certainly was not composed after ca. 725 if Mercian in origin, or after ca. 825 if Northumbrian.” R.D. Fulk, *A history of Old English meter* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992): 390. Considering that *The Dating of Beowulf* does not categorically deny a later date but highlights the evidence that demonstrates a highly *probable* early date, my chapter considers *Beowulf* to be an early poem.

century as Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which makes a comparison of its treatment of kings useful.<sup>68</sup> Poems such as *the Seafarer*, *the Wanderer*, and *Widsith*, survive in the tenth-century Exeter Book but, like *Beowulf*, were likely composed earlier.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, they present attitudes towards kingship that could in some respects reflect pre-Conquest views any time between roughly 700 and the Norman Conquest. It is important to note here that I am not arguing for a particular date of composition for *Beowulf*, nor any of the other poems. This is because the world depicted in these texts, while their exact date of composition may be unclear, is grounded in a strikingly similar vision of society and kingship, as I will discuss. It is this that connects them and makes them significant for this study, rather than a similar date of composition. In addition, ninth-century Alfredian writing looks back to and builds on this (reimagined) view of kingship present in *Beowulf*. In other words, ideas on royal authority present in *Beowulf* are transformed and reinterpreted in later literature, as the following chapter will demonstrate.

## 1.2 Kingship in *Beowulf*

That the *Beowulf* poet is concerned with leadership and authority becomes clear early on in the poem.

Lofdædum sceal  
in mægþa gehwære    man geþeon.<sup>70</sup> (ll. 24b–25)

A man must prosper, in each nation, with praiseworthy deeds.

Referring to Beow, son of Scyld, founder of the Danish royal house, the poet suggests that it is through exemplary behaviour that a king gains loyal followers, and thus does

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<sup>68</sup> The *Historia* was completed in 731. See Judith McClure and Roger Collins, "Introduction", in *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ix.

<sup>69</sup> While there is disagreement on this matter, Leonard Neidorf has convincingly argued for an early date for *Widsith*. He agrees with earlier 20th century scholarship (rejected in the 1980s due to, according to Neidorf, "paradigm shifts" rather than new evidence) that *Widsith* was "written in the seventh century and reflecting older oral traditions." Leonard Neidorf, "The Dating of Widsið and the Study of Germanic Antiquity", *Neophilologus* 97.1 (2013): 179–180.

<sup>70</sup> All citations are from *Klaeber's Beowulf*, ed. R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles, fourth edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). All translations are my own.

well for himself and his people. While indicating how power should be obtained, these lines do not reveal how it could be kept and passed on. Yet it is this concern, the holding on to power, with political stability and transfer of this power to an heir as its aim, that matters greatly in the poem. Continuity, and the aspects of kingship that are needed to provide it, are at the heart of the poem's interest in royal authority.

As a result, much has been written about *Beowulf*'s kings. As Eric Stanley has noted, "The fear of the Anglo-Saxons was lordlessness and unsettled times of usurpation and the deposition and expulsion or murder of rightful and unrightful kings."<sup>71</sup> For an exploration of royal authority in *Beowulf*, however, more is required than a discussion of an individual king, or a direct comparison between two kings. Exploring the poet's portrayal of royal authority by discussing the kingship of those who are given the honourable title of 'god cyning' allows us to identify what a good king does or does not do according to the poet. Crucially, it also shows the important role played by events outside of a ruler's control. The word 'wyrd' is important in this context. Often translated as 'fate,' Shippey has argued that it would be better interpreted as "what becomes, what comes to pass, the course of events."<sup>72</sup> This translation stresses that 'wyrd' is more than just something that is done, whether by a higher power or not, *to* people. It indicates a fundamental concern visible throughout the poem, and other Old English poetry, with changes that resist human attempts to influence them. I suggest that this idea is fundamental for the poem's exploration of kingship. The poet presents his audience with the changes and issues a king and kingdom can be faced with, specifically those related to wars and attacks from outside, and depicts different ways in which kings deal with them. If they are wise, they can to some extent prepare for them, but not influence them.<sup>73</sup>

The three kings I will examine in this chapter respond to and prepare for 'wyrd' in different ways. The strategic positions and roles Scyld, Hrothgar, and Beowulf take in the text are important in this context, and their appearances in the poem match the role

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<sup>71</sup> Eric Stanley, "Beowulf: Lordlessness in Ancient Times Is the Theme, as Much as the Glory of Kings, if not More", *Notes and Queries* 52.3 (September 2005): 267. All these elements occur in the poem, and the poet repeatedly expressed the tension surrounding successions, as Stanley has argued.

<sup>72</sup> Tom Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 40.

<sup>73</sup> As Shippey also noted, changes and reversals occur very regularly in *Beowulf*: "the only places where there is no change are Heaven and Hell." Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 39.

they play in their dynasty: first Scyld, who establishes a dynasty;<sup>74</sup> secondly Hrothgar, whose dynasty seems secure at first glance, though the poet hints at trouble to come; and lastly Beowulf himself, whose death signals not only the end of his line but also of Geatish independence. The circularity of the circumstances facing a king, and of the rise and fall of dynasties is, therefore, an important theme in the discussion of the three kings. I will argue that, in *Beowulf*, royal authority depends on the ability of a king to learn from the past and look to the future, accepting his duties and making decisions based on the resulting wisdom.

Furthermore, the poem also, and crucially, shows profound awareness of kings' inevitable imperfections. Royal authority in *Beowulf* moves within the boundaries of human failing and events that are beyond human control. The three kings become personifications of different stages in a royal dynasty, each stage featuring its own issues and challenges. All three may be good kings, but they are inevitably imperfect, each in a distinct way. All three are faced with a variety of external changes and events (be they warfare, civil strife, or dragons) that they cannot oversee. Therefore, rather than searching for similarities between the three good kings, in order to discover what the poet means when he calls a particular king 'good,' I suggest that this approach misses the point. Each king found himself in a different dynastic phase, confronted by particular changes and events, and each attempted the best he could in those circumstances. What makes all three good kings then is not simply the characteristics that they share, but more specifically how they apply them in particular challenging circumstances. The *Beowulf* poet's discussion of kingship, therefore, is much more complex than the epithet 'god' might at first suggest.

Nonetheless, some matters that a king *can* control are universal, and these apply to each king regardless of his place in his kingdom's dynasty. These matters arise from his behaviour and choices in relation to his subjects. The poem's exploration of royal authority is built on reciprocity in the relationship between a king and his people. Specifically, this relationship entails the protection of his people, his willingness (or unwillingness) to ask for advice and keep his loyal men close, and the provision of an

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<sup>74</sup> Gale Owen-Crocker has commented that Scyld's status as founder of a dynasty and his mysterious arrival as infant by boat shows parallels with the biblical Moses. Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals in Beowulf and the structure of the poem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 18.

heir in order to establish continuity and stability for the kingdom. These elements will recur in the discussion of Scyld, Hrothgar, and Beowulf as kings, to which I now turn.

### 1.3. Scyld as good king

The reign of the poem's first king, Scyld, is defined by his position as the first king of his dynasty. I will argue that he is a good king because he exerts his power in a manner befitting this particular position: his military prowess and provision of continuity through his heir, Beow, allow him to provide the stability his people need at that particular moment. Scyld is introduced early in the poem, immediately after the poet has declared his intention to take his audience back in time, to tell of the 'þrym' (l. 2b; glory, power) and 'ellen' (l. 3b; courage) of the Danes. Scyld Scefing is introduced in line 5, and is therefore immediately associated with these positive terms.<sup>75</sup> His rulership takes up surprisingly little space, however, compared to that of the other 'good' kings, Hrothgar and Beowulf:

Oft Scyld Scefing    sceapena þreatum  
 monegum mægþum    meodosetla ofteah,  
 egsode earlas    syððan ærest wearð  
 feascraft funden.    He þæs frofre gebad,  
 weox under wolcnum,    weorðmyndum þah  
 oð þæt him æghwylc    þara ymbsittendra  
 ofer hronrade    hyran scolde,  
 gomban gyldan.    Þæt wæs god cyning. (ll. 4–11)

Often Scyld Scefing deprived many nations,  
 from enemy troops, of mead-benches

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<sup>75</sup> Francis Leneghan has argued that, contrary to earlier suggestions, the poem's opening sequence including Scyld was not originally a part of the Danish royal tradition, but an invention by the *Beowulf* poet. Francis Leneghan, "Reshaping tradition: the originality of the Scyld Scefing episode in *Beowulf*", *Transmission and Generation in Medieval and Renaissance Literature: Essays in Honour of John Scattergood*, ed. Karen Hodder and Brendan O'Connell (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 22.

the warrior terrified from the time previously  
 when he was first found abandoned.  
 He received consolation for that, prospered under the skies,  
 earned glory, until each of those neighbouring people  
 across the sea had to obey him,  
 pay tribute to him. That was a good king.

Compared to the later good kings, Scyld's inclusion here may seem surprising due to the brevity of the description. Indeed, from the text above it may appear that Scyld is a good king solely because of his warrior-like qualities. And yet, as I will discuss, these very same qualities hinder Beowulf in performing his duties as king properly. The solution to this apparent contradiction lies in two elements that distinguish Scyld from Beowulf, and that are unrelated to his military prowess: the fact that Scyld is the founder of a dynasty, and that he had a son.

Other aspects of the story, however, first appear to highlight the similarities between the poem's first king and last king. As Andy Orchard has noted, analogues suggest that the Scyld episode in *Beowulf* is derived from "a myth about a fertility god, who came across water."<sup>76</sup> In these analogues, however, for instance in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, it is his father, Scaef who, as the son of the biblical Noah, provides the connection with water and sea, as the chronicler notes he was born on Noah's ark.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, Beow, Scyld's son, has a name that means barley, which strengthens this suggestion.<sup>78</sup> Orchard proposes that this transferral of the story from Scaef to Scyld is related to the main events of the poem: "like Scyld Scefing, Beowulf himself will come

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<sup>76</sup> Andy Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 103. Richard North has argued that the Scyld tradition has a Danish origin, importing Scyld from a Danish genealogy in order to construct his Danish royal dynasty in *Beowulf*. Richard North, *Heathen Gods in Old English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 185–203.

<sup>77</sup> Some texts are closer to the genealogy presented in *Beowulf* than others. The B and C Mss of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* note that Scaef arrived over sea, as the son of Noah. See, for instance: Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition: MS C*. Gen. Eds. David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 57. Here, Heremod becomes Scyld's father several generations later. Aethelweard, however, gives the same genealogy as the *Beowulf* poet, but keeps Scaef rather than Scyld as the overseas arrival. See also Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 100–102.

<sup>78</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 103.

unannounced across the sea as a ‘shield’ or protection to aid the Danes in their ‘dire distress.’<sup>79</sup> He also notes that they depart in the same way: with much treasure, and never seen again in Denmark.<sup>80</sup> What emerges here is a theme of circularity. Beowulf fails where Scyld succeeds, and Heremod, Scyld’s predecessor and an example of bad kingship according to the poet, is compared to Beowulf in one of Hrothgar’s speeches.<sup>81</sup> Thus, at the end of the poem the Geats are in the same situation as the Danes were before the arrival of Scyld. Nonetheless, the poet’s exploration of kingship and the inevitability of a dynasty’s end is more complex than this circularity would suggest. While these similarities are certainly present, Beowulf is *not* the same kind of ruler as Heremod was—their reputations after their deaths emphasise this.

As the founder of the Danish dynasty, Scyld becomes the embodiment of a warrior’s rise to power, a rise that is not so much down to chance as to the successful candidate’s personal characteristics. As such, in few words, the poet needs to explain how it was that Scyld managed to become king when his descent was completely unknown.<sup>82</sup> Scyld, then, did not gain his position by virtue of his lineage, but through his actions. In this case, his actions consist specifically of making a name for himself by fighting and conquering. The poet thus foreshadows Beowulf’s own career, as he is not considered to be good enough by his family and has to prove himself first in the world.<sup>83</sup> Scyld’s good kingship, then, lies only partially in his ability to exact tribute from and conquer other peoples. It is also indicated by the continuity he manages to create by providing his people with an heir, Beow.

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<sup>79</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 103.

<sup>80</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 103.

<sup>81</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 104.

<sup>82</sup> Interestingly, in the A manuscript of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Scyld is the son of Heremod, and the West-Saxon royal line descends from them (and Noah, as seen earlier). Francis Leneghan has argued that these genealogies resulted from an “increasing concern with the legitimacy of royal power in eighth and ninth-century Anglo-Saxon England...” Francis Leneghan, “Royal wisdom and the Alfredian Context of Cynewulf and Cyneheard”, *Anglo-Saxon England* 39 (Dec. 2010): 80.

<sup>83</sup> ll. 2186b–2191a.



### 1.3.1. The Case of Beow

Beow is important for Scyld's kingship, as he provides the Danes with continuity of authority.<sup>84</sup> This continuity arises from the succession of a son who has grown up learning about his duties and gaining his subjects' loyalty which, ideally, allows for a relatively peaceful transition of power. Frederick Biggs has noted the importance of a designated heir: "part of a king's responsibility is to see that the succession is secure in a son."<sup>85</sup> The importance of ensuring the kingdom is provided with a royal successor is also highlighted by the fact that it is Beow, not Scyld, who is described as 'þone god sende/ folce to frofre' (ll. 1.13–14; sent by God, as comfort to the people), as Biggs has also noted.<sup>86</sup> Throughout the poem, the poet explores the dangers surrounding the continuity of a royal line. Yet this situation, with Scyld seemingly having only one heir, appears to work well. Indeed, being the son of a king and growing up a designated heir to the throne, allows a prince to establish a relationship with his followers from a young age.

Swa sceal ge(ong) guma    gode gewyrcean  
 fromum feohgiftum    on fæder (bea)rme  
 þæt hine on ylde    eft gewunigen  
 wilgesipas    þonne wig cume,  
 leode gelæsten:    lofdædum sceal  
 in mægþa gehwære    man geþeon (ll. 20–25)

So must a young man do good deeds  
 with precious gifts while in his father's care,  
 so that later in life pleasant companions stand by him,  
 when war comes people serve him. A man must prosper,  
 in each nation, with praiseworthy deeds.

This passage is vital to our understanding of kingship in the poem. From the beginning, the poet stresses the importance of reciprocity between lord and follower for effective

<sup>84</sup> The manuscript refers to him, rather confusingly, as Beowulf, likely a mistake from the scribe. Some scholars as a result refer to him as Beowulf.

<sup>85</sup> Frederick M. Biggs, "Beowulf and some fictions of the Geatish succession", *Anglo-Saxon England* 32 (2003): 56.

<sup>86</sup> Biggs, "Beowulf and some fictions", 58.

kingship.<sup>87</sup> These followers are not just any *gesipas*, but *wilgesipas*. The poet hints at the dangers of attracting the wrong kind of following, and highlights the importance of a good, reciprocal, relationship between lord and retainers. This relationship needs to be cemented early on through generosity: loyalty needs to be nurtured and developed through an established comitatus from a young age. As Clare A. Lees has noted, establishing these bonds is an important aspect of manhood: “the most potent bonds between man and man are not necessarily those of father and son but those of lord and noble retainer.”<sup>88</sup> In the male-centred world of *Beowulf*, the ties between a lord and his men reflect strongly on their perceived masculinity, especially on that of the lord, and predicts his success as a leader.

This crucial role of the relationship between a lord and his retainers is not unique to *Beowulf*. Indeed, the elements that nurture the relationship, generosity and loyalty, also play a significant part in texts such as the *Cynewulf and Cyneheard* episode in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*. In the *Cynewulf and Cyneheard* episode, found as annal for the year 755 but actually referring to events starting in 757, we read for instance:

Her Cynewulf benam Sigebryht his rices and Westseaxna wiotan for unryhtum dedum, buton Hamtunscire, 7 he hæfde þa oþ he ofslog þone aldormon þe him lengest wunode, and hiene þa Cynewulf on Andred adræfde, 7 he þær wunade oþ þæt hiene an swan ofstang æt Pryfetesflodan: 7 he wræc þone aldormon Cumbran.<sup>89</sup>

In this year Cynewulf and the councillors of the West-Saxons deprived Sigebryht of his kingdom, apart from Hampshire, because of unjust deeds. And he (Sigebryht) held it (Hampshire) until he killed the ealdorman who had remained with him the longest, and then Cynewulf exiled him into the forest.

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<sup>87</sup> Scott Gwara, *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV 2008), 44.

<sup>88</sup> Clare A. Lees, “Men and *Beowulf*,” in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 142.

<sup>89</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 3: MS A*. Ed. Janet Bately, Gen. Eds. David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1986), 36.

And he lived there until a swineherd stabbed him to death at Provett (in Hampshire); and he (the swineherd) avenged the ealdorman, Cumbra.

Sigeberht's background, like Scyld's, is sketched for us quickly but effectively. In this case, however, the king loses his kingdom, and the author needs few words to justify such an act on the part of Cynewulf: Sigeberht had performed 'unryhtum dædum.' The exact nature of these deeds is not made explicit, but the author gives us a good insight into his character when he states that Sigeberht killed the retainer who had been with him longest, someone who had not abandoned him when he lost his kingdom. No further examples of the former king's unjust conduct are given, because none are needed: he has broken the bond between lord and retainer. Sigeberht's death becomes a factual statement, as a swineheard avenges the ealdorman. In *Beowulf*, on the other hand, Beow's generosity cements the relationship with his followers, rewarding the loyalty shown to him. The fact that 'a man must prosper, in each nation, with praiseworthy deeds' demonstrates again the theme of circularity in the poem. After all, it is due to these praiseworthy deeds that a young prince can acquire the wealth to distribute to his followers.

Generosity is not only related to a lord's relationship with his warriors, but can also ensure the kind of lasting reputation to which a good king aspires. This becomes clear, for instance, in the Old English poem *Widsith*, where the eponymous *scop* recalls the great kings he claims to have worked for.<sup>90</sup> The narrator emphasises the beneficence of the rulers he served in the last twelve lines:

Swa ic þæt symle onfond    on þære feringe,  
 þæt se biþ leofast    londbuendum  
 se þe him god syleð    gumena rice  
 to gehealdenne,    þenden he her leofað.”  
 Swa scriþende    gesceapum hweorfað

<sup>90</sup> The name 'Widsith' means 'Far-Journey', and is therefore not so much a specific individual, but rather a general *scop* who, according to John Niles "embodies virtually all geographical and historical knowledge that is worth having. He has travelled everywhere and seen everyone" (191). Niles links the poem to a growing "sense of English nationhood and pride in English royalty" (193). The poet, then, does not present Widsith as a realistic *scop* who has worked for all these kings, but as a vehicle to introduce and comment on famous historical kings and place them in an English-centred framework. John D. Niles, "Widsith and the Anthropology of the Past", *Philological Quarterly* 78 (Winter 1999): 171–213.

gleomen gumena    geond grunda fela,  
 þearfe secgað,    þoncword sprecaþ,  
 simle suð oþþe norð    sumne gemetað  
 gydda gleawne,    geofum unhneawne,  
 se þe fore duguþe wile    dom aræran,  
 eorlscipe æfnan,    oþþæt eal scæceð,  
 leoht ond lif somod;    lof se gewyrceð,  
 hafað under heofonum    heahfæstne dom.<sup>91</sup> (ll. 131–143)

So I have always found during these journeys  
 that he who is the most beloved living on earth  
 is the one to whom God gives a kingdom of men  
 to hold while he lives here.  
 so they turned to go wandering,  
 the minstrels of men through the many lands  
 speaking when needed, saying words of thanks  
 always to the South or North they measure some  
 skillful song, he gives abundant gifts  
 who for honour wants to create glory,  
 to show courage, until all passes  
 Light and life together; he who builds praise  
 has under the heavens lasting glory.

*Widsith* shares with *Beowulf* (and many other Old English poems) a concern with continuity, with leaving behind some kind of legacy. *Widsith* provides a significant insight into a leadership culture that emphasises the need to be remembered, and the way to be remembered is to have one's deeds transformed into poetry. *Widsith*'s poet here specifically links this to generosity. A king's generosity, then, extends itself beyond the usual gift-giving between brave warriors to include those who, with their artistic skills, can create lasting glory for a king through songs. These songs can 'raise renown with his men,' helping a ruler (and indirectly also his *scop*) to establish a good reputation both

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<sup>91</sup> "Widsith", in *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie (London: Columbia University Press, 1936), 149–150.

during his life and after. Likewise, the fact that Beow grows up as his father's heir allows him to establish these kinds of relationships, prove himself in battle, and use the spoils to reward those who stood by him loyally and those who can potentially enhance his reputation. While Scyld is the good king, it is Beow, as noted above, "þone god sende/ folce to frofre." The addition that Beow was sent "as comfort to the people" is telling, as is the next part of the line which states that "Fyrenðearfe ongeat" (l. 14b; He (i.e. God) perceived their dire distress). Clearly the arrival of Scyld and his exemplary kingship did not solve all of the Danish people's anguish; it was the birth of Beow that did that. The poet here demonstrates his preoccupation with continuity clearly. Scyld's son symbolises the ascent of the Danish people, his youthful exploits teaching him to present his people with much-needed stability, the culmination of which can be seen in the building of Heorot by his great-grandson, Hrothgar.

The poet, thus, emphasises the fact that Scyld's good kingship is not merely based on universal characteristics of good kingship, but specifically on the way he employs his skills depending on the current position of his dynasty and needs of his kingdom. This is where comparisons between the poem's 'good' kings tend to fall short, because they attempt to place kings in a binary framework of good or bad kingship. One such comparison, by Judy King, considers the kingship of Beowulf and Scyld specifically. King suggests that Scyld contrasts negatively with Beowulf, as he is violent where Beowulf is not. This statement however begs the question why Scyld is then still awarded the description of a good ruler. King resolves this issue by discussing Scyld as part of God's plan, and concludes that "'Pæt wæs god cyning!' is not ironic when applied to Scyld; he is a good king, but only by the standards of his own society."<sup>92</sup> Rather confusingly, however, she also comments that Scyld is a 'negative exemplum,' although not quite so disastrous as kings like Heremod.<sup>93</sup> This attempt to determine whether Scyld was actually a good or bad king does not do justice to his role in the poem and to the poet's conception of kingship. Scyld is clearly loved by his people and described in positive terms, which would be a baffling description if he is meant to provide the audience with a straightforward negative example of kingship, as King argues. Such an assessment also ignores the fact that, ultimately, Scyld is judged by the poet and *his*

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<sup>92</sup> Judy King, "Launching the Hero: The Case of Scyld and Beowulf", *Neophilologus* 87.3 (July 2013): 462.

<sup>93</sup> King, "Launching the Hero", 460.

society — and it is the poet, not the king's subjects, who presents him as a good king. In the overall framework of kingship in the poem Scyld is not just the founding father of the Scyldings, but also of the 'good kings.' He is not a perfect king, but the one his people needed at that time. This is what earns him the epithet of 'good king.'

### 1.3.2. The Importance of Wisdom

An important component of being a 'good king' in *Beowulf* is wisdom. As Shippey has argued, wisdom was central to any ideal of kingship: it is not "a purely acquired state of knowledge, but instead a condition inseparable from concepts such as resolution, power, and foresight."<sup>94</sup> The concept of wisdom in *Beowulf* is diverse: it includes, for instance, "practical cleverness, skill in words and works, knowledge of the past, ability to predict accurately, prudence, understanding, and the ability to choose and direct one's conduct rightly."<sup>95</sup> I suggest that when it comes to kingship in *Beowulf* the poet attaches special significance to a knowledge of the past and predictions for the future. Hrothgar demonstrates both, by showing awareness of his ancestors' deeds and the kingdom's history, and by predicting Beowulf's future and advising him accordingly. The combined power of knowledge of the past and foresight is of crucial importance.<sup>96</sup> A wise king is one who considers the future of his kingdom with the knowledge of his dynasty's history and a general sense of where he belongs. In other words, he needs to prepare for the future by learning from the past. When Scyld dies, he is placed in a boat with 'madma fela' (l. 36b; many treasures), and the poet dwells upon the splendour of his departure. Beow becomes king, and produces a son called Healfdene. Wisdom, in this case, is inevitably linked to age: ageing allows a king to contemplate the past and future of his dynasty. Notably, all three of these kings are stated to have lived and ruled long: Scyld 'lange ahte' (l. 31; ruled long); Beow ruled for 'longe þrage' (l. 54; a long time), and Healfdene 'heold þenden lifde / gamol ond guðreow' (ll. 57–58; ruled while he lived, old and fierce in fight). Interestingly, in the case of both Scyld and Beow, the reference to their long reigns occurs in the second half-line, alliterating in both cases with 'leof' (dear, beloved) in the first half-line. This strengthens the connection between the lord's longevity, itself linked

<sup>94</sup> Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 67.

<sup>95</sup> R. E. Kaske, "Sapientia et Fortitudo as the controlling theme of *Beowulf*", *Studies in Philology* 55.3 (July 1958): 425.

<sup>96</sup> There is an interesting difference here with the kind of wisdom propagated by King Alfred and his circle, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

to steady and continuous rulership, and a positive, reciprocal, relationship with his subjects. The problems start with Healfdene, who has three sons; Hrothgar is not the eldest of these. A kingdom with too many potential heirs to the throne will encounter trouble, as the case of Hrothgar will show, but a kingdom without heirs at all can also lead to instability, as it proves to be in the case of Beowulf. I return to this point in my discussion of Hrothgar, whose behaviour provides a clear example of the two aspects of wisdom, the ability to look both back and forward.

*Beowulf*, then, begins with a kingdom at its inception, demonstrating the ideal circumstances and decisions a kingdom needs to grow and thrive. One of these ideal situations consists of having a long-lived king who is succeeded by his only son: “Scyld’s funeral marks a beginning; it is able to do so because he leaves behind a son, Beowulf.”<sup>97</sup> The fact that this continuity cannot, ultimately, be maintained is a first sign that, despite all their power, even kings cannot control everything. They have to accept that, aided by their wisdom, they can only try to deal as best they can with the circumstances that face them. The case of Hrothgar illustrates this point well.

#### 1.4. Hrothgar

While he reigns successfully for many years, Hrothgar’s kingship in the poem is characterised by what befalls him in his old age, namely the attacks by Grendel and later Grendel’s mother. However, while his kingship is faulty in those later years, the epithet of ‘gōd cyning’ is still deserved, and the poet stresses that Hrothgar was loved and not blamed for the kingdom’s misfortunes by his people.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, some have argued that Hrothgar, being just a victim of his circumstances, is the best king in the poem.<sup>99</sup> As I have noted above, the poet depicts good kingship not merely as a matter of personal characteristics and skills, but as the use of these characteristics and skills based on the demands of the kingdom’s particular circumstances. What a kingdom needs depends on internal issues, such as dynastic position (i.e. is it the beginning, middle, or end of a dynasty? Does a king need to conquer land like Scyld, or contain and protect his kingdom

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<sup>97</sup> Biggs, “*Beowulf* and some fictions”, 59.

<sup>98</sup> l. 861.

<sup>99</sup> See, for instance: John Leyerle, “Beowulf the hero and the King”, *Medium Ævum* 34.2 (1 January 1965): 89–102.

like Hrothgar?), and external threats, such as the one posed by Grendel. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that any discussion attempting to determine which king might have been ‘best’ is unproductive. In the case of Hrothgar, however, it would be better to replace the adjective ‘best’ with ‘wisest.’ I propose that of all the kings in the poem Hrothgar provides the clearest example of a king whose decisions are based on careful considerations of the future and knowledge gained from the past. His wisdom is “a contemplative wisdom primarily of inner cultivation of self, rather than of external proficiency and accomplishment.”<sup>100</sup> Hrothgar’s use of wisdom is again dependent on his dynastic position. His position as the ‘king in the middle,’ representing the climax of his dynasty’s power and the beginning of its downfall, allows him to demonstrate his wisdom and, as I will discuss in the subchapter on Beowulf, to become a teacher.

By presenting Hrothgar’s good kingship as based on his wisdom I do not mean to suggest that he is depicted as faultless. As Kaske has noted, “he is no longer at his best when facing decisions involving violence or the prospect of it.”<sup>101</sup> His age has diminished his strength and affected decisions relating to physical prowess. Indeed, it is the imbalance between the Danes’ wisdom and strength (or *Sapientia* and *Fortitudo*) which has allowed Grendel to continue his reign of terror for twelve years.<sup>102</sup> Rather, what characterises Hrothgar’s wisdom is his ability to understand the past and prepare for the future without succumbing to pride. At the heart of this good and wise rulership is Hrothgar’s relationship with his people. I suggest that Hrothgar’s wisdom, and as a result his royal authority, is founded on the fact that he shows a profound awareness of the importance of continuity and reciprocity for the well-being of his subjects. The tragedy of his reign, then, is not just that he cannot fight the evil afflicting him and his people. It is that, while his reign has a promising start, his wisdom becomes useless in the face of the events that befall him and his people later. The limitations of a king’s authority and power become painfully visible when faced with ‘wyrd.’

It should be noted here that Hrothgar is not the last of his line to rule. According to Dorothy Whitelock, the story of the betrayal by Hrothgar’s nephew Hrothulf, killing the old king’s son and heir, Hrethric, to usurp the throne would have been known to the

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<sup>100</sup> Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo*”, 432.

<sup>101</sup> Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo*”, 436.

<sup>102</sup> Kaske, “*Sapientia et Fortitudo*”, 436.



poet's audience.<sup>103</sup> The poet's foreshadowing of these events therefore adds to the tragedy of Hrothgar's kingship, and signals to the audience that even such a wise king as Hrothgar cannot always safeguard his dynastic line.<sup>104</sup> His reign experiences a promising start, and his dynasty reaches its climax in the building of Heorot. Immediately afterwards, the circular nature of royal dynasties becomes apparent, as Grendel begins his attacks. Thus, the downfall of Hrothgar's dynasty, briefly interrupted by Beowulf's defeat of Grendel, gains a sense of irony. The enemy outside may finally be defeated, but the real enemy, the one that leads to the downfall of Hrothgar's line, turns out to have been waiting within the protective walls of Heorot all along.

Hrothgar's early years as king are characterised by his relationships with his followers. When first introduced, his situation closely mirrors that of his grandfather, Beow, in its focus on gaining the loyalty of his kinsmen:

Pa wæs Hroðgare heresped gyfen,  
wiges weorðmynd, þæt him his winemagas  
georne hyrdon, oðð þæt seo geogoð geweax  
magodriht micel. (ll. 64–67a).

Then Hrothgar was given success in battle,  
honour of war, so that his friendly kinsmen  
obeyed eagerly until the young ones grew into  
a great troop of retainers.

Hrothgar is successful in war from an early age, gathering around him loyal followers. Other aspects of his good kingship are also established early on, introduced through his building of Heorot. Hrothgar decides to build a hall to surpass all others, so that he can

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<sup>103</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 36.

<sup>104</sup> The poet refers to Hrothgar and Hrothulf sitting together in harmony, stating that 'penden' (at that time) there was no treachery yet (ll. 1016–1018). Orchard confirms that Hrothulf was a well-known character in Scandinavian legends, and gives Saxo Grammaticus' work as an example detailing Hrothulf's treachery by killing Hrothgar's son and heir. Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 245.

“þær on innan eall gedælan / geongum 7 ealdum, swylc him Godsealde, buton folcscare / ond feorum gumena” (ll. 71–73; There inside deal out everything to young and old, just as God bequeathed it, apart from the land shared by the folk and the lives of men).

These lines suggest two things; firstly, that Hrothgar’s generosity is an important feature of his kingship (as will be discussed at more length later), and secondly that this generosity had its limits. According to Tuso, who translates ‘feorum’ as ‘bodies,’ the poet refers to slaves.<sup>105</sup> While ‘feorum’ appears to be usually translated as ‘lives,’<sup>106</sup> its interpretation is the subject of debate. Barbara Raw, describing the reference as “puzzling,” interprets it as a possible condemnation by the Christian poet of ritual killing.<sup>107</sup> However, considering its context, detailing Hrothgar’s generosity and its limitations, I suggest that the ‘lives of men’ here is the poet’s assurance that Hrothgar has a profound understanding of his relationship with his men. He cannot demand that his men give their lives for him—they need to be willing to do so, based on their loyalty towards and trust in their king. This line suggests that Hrothgar understands that he cannot gift everything. Not everything is his to give, and the poet appears to say, therefore, that Hrothgar respects the boundaries of his own authority.

At this point Hrothgar is still a young man, and he builds Heorot as a symbol not only of his power but also, I would suggest, as a sign of continuity;<sup>108</sup> he is, after all, the great-grandson of Scyld Scefing, and his ancestors’ leadership skills have brought prosperity to the Danes. These skills, though, are the result of a political reality that allowed each generation the chance to hone and develop the qualities required to take

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<sup>105</sup> In a footnote, Tuso gives ‘men’s lives’ as an alternative to ‘bodies’, and adds: “Apparently slaves, along with public land, were not in the king’s power to give away.” *Beowulf*, ed. Joseph F. Tuso (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, inc., 1975), 2.

<sup>106</sup> See, for instance, Kiernan. The Bosworth Toller Dictionary also gives ‘lives’ as its first translation, and does not give ‘bodies’ as an option. Bosworth Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary, 2010, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/010397>.

<sup>107</sup> Barbara Raw, “Royal Power and Royal Symbols in *Beowulf*”, in *The Age of Sutton Hoo, The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. Martin Carver (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1992), 170. This ritual killing could, according to Raw, be a reference to a later passage which “describes the Danes’ reversion to Devil-worship after the coming of Grendel.” I do not agree that this scene presents a ‘reversion,’ as the Danes in *Beowulf* were never Christian.

<sup>108</sup> Stuart Elden has stated that Heorot symbolises mostly celebration and order, and that “The hall speaks of the power of the Danes, of their proud lineage from Scyld Scefing.” Stuart Elden, “Place symbolism and land politics in *Beowulf*”, *Cultural Geographies* 16 (2009): 449. The symbolising of order expresses itself in the stability and continuity of Heorot, and by extension the Danish royal family.

over the predecessor's reign successfully. Leo Carruthers has noted that early medieval English kingdoms did not have a system of primogeniture, and as such there was no automatic succession.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, according to David Dumville, "eligibility for kingship in the pre-Viking period depended, in theory and generally in practice, simply on descent from the founder of the dynasty."<sup>110</sup> The arrival of Christianity, however, signalled a gradual shift in thinking about the succession of kings. Of vital importance for the Church was the notion of legitimacy; Alcuin, for instance, expressed the Church's concerns with "legitimacy as a qualification for kingship."<sup>111</sup> According to Dumville, two kinds of legitimacy were important for the church: royal birth and consecration.<sup>112</sup> Frederick Biggs has argued that the *Beowulf* poet presents his audience with two different models of succession. The first is the 'Germanic' model, which can provide many potential heirs, while the second, 'Christian,' model only considers the sons of kings. The poet, according to Biggs, has identified Christianity as the source of this shift in political thinking about successions. He demonstrates appreciation for the old model, while seeing the good and bad in both.<sup>113</sup> I do not agree entirely. While the poet does present his audience with several models of succession, there is, I suggest, a clear preference for the one that seems to provide a kingdom with the most stability and continuity, namely the succession of the eldest son. This is clear in the example of Beow discussed above.<sup>114</sup> This does not mean, however, that the poet is unaware of the possible failings of such a system, nor that he presents other types of succession in a strictly negative light. The poet shows awareness of circumstances beyond human control, and how they may affect a royal house, by discussing available options. Nonetheless, the preferred option appears to be the eldest son of a king. If that is not possible, the search is widened. The ideal is, then, a succession such as Beow's. As the eldest son he was, as we have seen, expected to take over, which allowed him to gather round him loyal followers, men he needed to stand by him later. This also links in with Wealhtheow's concerns for her own sons when Hrothgar appears

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<sup>109</sup> Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism", 28.

<sup>110</sup> David N. Dumville, "The Ætheling: A Study in Anglo-Saxon Constitutional History", in *Anglo-Saxon England* 8, ed. Peter Clemoes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>111</sup> Dumville, "The Ætheling", 26–27.

<sup>112</sup> Dumville, "The Ætheling", 26–27.

<sup>113</sup> Biggs, "The Politics of Succession in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon England", *Speculum* 80.3 (2005): 741.

<sup>114</sup> Biggs, "The Politics of Succession", 709.

to adopt Beowulf as his son, and the often-discussed implication that Beowulf, as a result, could succeed Hrothgar. I will discuss this passage later.

When it comes to the apparently ideal direct succession of an eldest son, the poet only depicts this explicitly in the case of Beow, but there is no reason to assume this was not the case for Beow's son, Healfdane. Hrothgar's own succession to the throne may have been complicated by the fact that he was not the intended heir, but he was still the king's son. As such, the ideal line of continuity may not have been possible, but the kingdom's internal safety never seems to have been endangered. The Danes prospered due to the stability in the succession of their royal family, and the building of Heorot symbolised this prosperity at its height. At the same time, it also signals the beginning of its downfall, as Grendel's grievances appear to be specifically related to Heorot.

Importantly, by the time of Grendel's arrival time, Hrothgar is an old man. It is Hrothgar's age that prevents him from protecting his people adequately, and through his depiction of this aged king the poet reveals the tragedy of kingship: a good king can be hindered by circumstances out of his own control —some of them as simple as growing old— and often two desirable qualities contain elements that are contradictory, with one obstructing the other. Indeed, Thijs Porck argues that the age of the poem's leading kings, Hrothgar and Beowulf, is crucial for our understanding of the poem. He suggests *Beowulf* should be read in the "context of the political problems that faced elderly kings in the Early Middle Ages."<sup>115</sup> He writes that the poet presents his audience with a model of elderly kingship which contrasts Beowulf and Hrothgar, with the latter depicted as passive but also "generous and wise."<sup>116</sup> I will explore Hrothgar's wisdom more fully, especially where it is expressed most forcefully in his interactions with Beowulf and his relationships with his followers.

Hrothgar's wisdom is often discussed in relation to the king's paternal approach to Beowulf, as he warns, for example, against the dangers of pride. However, I suggest that Hrothgar's insistence on continuity wherever possible, both in word and action, is what lies at the heart of the king's association with wisdom. As noted above, Shippey sees wisdom not simply as attainment of knowledge, but as inseparably linked to characteristics such as resolution and foresight.<sup>117</sup> Of these, it is especially the notion of

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<sup>115</sup> Thijs Porck, *Old Age in Early Medieval England: A Cultural History* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), 179.

<sup>116</sup> Porck, *Old Age*, 196.

<sup>117</sup> Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 67.

foresight which characterises Hrothgar, and which he uses to warn Beowulf. I would add to this that besides looking forward, looking back is an equally important feature of royal wisdom in the poem. The past provides a ruler with valuable lessons. This awareness of the past and consideration of the future establishes that important sense of continuity, something that Beowulf notably lacks himself, as I will discuss later. These features are best illustrated by looking at Hrothgar's famous speech to Beowulf, before the latter's departure back to Geatland. Beowulf gives Hrothgar the hilt of the sword he found in Grendel's mother's lair, and which he used to defeat her.

Hroðgar maðelode. Hylt sceawode,  
 ealde lafe; on ðæm wæs or writen  
 fyrngewinnes, syðþan flod ofsloh,  
 gifen geotende, giganta cyn,  
 frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod  
 ecean Dryhtne. Him þæs endelea  
 þurh wæteres wylm Waldend sealde.  
 Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes,  
 þurh rūnstafas rihte gemearcod,  
 geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sweord geworht,  
 irena cyst ærest wære,  
 wreopenhilt ond wyrmfah. Ða se wisa spræc,  
 sunu Healfdenes; swigedon ealle:  
 "Þæt, la, mæg secgan, se þe soð ond riht  
 fremed on folce, feor eal gemon,  
 eald eðelweard, þæt ðes eorl wære  
 geboren betera. (ll. 1689–1705).

Hrothgar spoke, he studied the hilt,  
 the ancient heirloom; on that was written the beginning  
 of the ancient conflict, from when the flood killed,  
 the rushing sea, the race of giants.  
 They suffered horribly; that was an estranged race  
 to the eternal Lord. To them therefore a final reward  
 through the surging of water the Lord bequeathed.

Likewise there was on the hilt of shining gold,  
 through runic letters marked rightly,  
 set down and told, for whom that sword was made,  
 the best iron was made first,  
 the twisted hilt and dragon ornamentation.  
 Then the wise one spoke,  
 the son of Healfdene. Everyone was silent:  
 “That, indeed, may one say, he who truth and right  
 brings about in the nation, remembers all from long ago,  
 old guardian of the realm, that this warrior was  
 born better.

What for Beowulf is a treasured spoil of war provokes more thought for the old king. As an ‘ealde lafe’ (old heirloom) it provides a needed connection with the past, more specifically with the Danish royal family’s past. In addition, Hrothgar assumes part of his authority here, proclaiming Beowulf to be ‘geboren betera,’ based on what he remembers from the past. There is a sense of continuity in this passage, an awareness of the importance of what has gone before symbolised by the ancient sword. Dennis Cronan has noted that “When Beowulf hands over the hilt, he is bestowing upon the king a gift of wisdom, and Hrothgar responds in kind, presenting a return gift of wisdom in his speech.”<sup>118</sup> I agree that Beowulf presents Hrothgar with a source of wisdom through the hilt, as the hilt presents the story of the downfall of the giants, who were destroyed by God just as Grendel and his mother were. But I do not think that this was Beowulf’s intention, nor that he is aware of the lessons that can be learned by extension. The poet does not allow Beowulf to say anything about the sword other than that he believed it to be an “ealdsweord eacen” (l. 1663; old and powerful sword), which God helped him to yield. It is Hrothgar who is said to examine the hilt closely, and whose wisdom allows him to draw lessons from it. Indeed, the hilt and its illustrations inspire him to speak to Beowulf about the past and use examples of past kingship to warn him. As Irving and Shippey have noted, the hilt warns of the “sudden and extreme shift of power,”<sup>119</sup> a lesson Hrothgar takes from the hilt and then tries to imprint on Beowulf by using the example

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<sup>118</sup> Dennis Cronan, “Hrothgar and the Golden Hylt in *Beowulf*”, *Traditio* 72 (2017): 117.

<sup>119</sup> Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 41.

of Heremod in his speech which, notably, he almost immediately gives after his examination of the hilt. I will return to this speech in my discussion of Beowulf's own kingship.

#### 1.4.1. Hrothgar's succession

Hrothgar's kingship presents an interesting study in ideas about royal succession, and the extent to which a (wise) king could expect to have any influence in the matter. I have discussed royal succession as a tool for continuity above, but here I will consider more specifically the case of Hrothgar's succession, his potential heirs, and the problems they could face. Crucial to this part of the narrative is that, when it comes to the passing on of the crown after his death, Hrothgar's wisdom appears to show its limitations, as he seems to adopt Beowulf as his heir. Hrothgar's reasoning may be traced to an understanding of two types of succession in *Beowulf*, as identified by Michael Drout, namely inheritance by blood and inheritance by deeds: "In ideal situations, the two systems are complementary and isomorphic, so the two separate processes appear to be one."<sup>120</sup> That this is an ideal rather than a practical situation is borne out by the fact that few kings in the poem combine these types —the most obvious of them being Beow, Hrothgar's direct ancestor. As Drout has stated, Beow is the son of a king and, as discussed previously, had the opportunity to perform brave deeds in his youth, thus securing the loyalty of his followers. The idea that a combination of these types of inheritance is ideal becomes clear when one considers the groups of people who benefit from each: inheritance by blood involves one's kin, inheritance by deeds one's warriors.<sup>121</sup> Thus, the ruler in whom these two systems are brought together is better positioned than anyone to provide his kingdom with stability and continuity. It is in this light, too, that Hrothgar's words and decisions can be understood better. It explains, for instance, why Hrothgar, when first speaking to Beowulf and remembering when he first became king, says:

ða wæs Heregar dead  
 min yldra mæg unlifigende,  
 bearn Healfdenes. Se wæs betere ðonne ic! (ll. 467b–469).

<sup>120</sup> Drout, "Blood and Deeds", 202.

<sup>121</sup> Drout, "Blood and Deeds", 203.

Then Heorogar was dead  
 My older brother, unliving  
 the son of Healfdene. He was better than I!

In the light of the above, it is less likely that Hrothgar is being modest in describing his brother as better. Heorogar, as the eldest son, would have been in the same position as his grandfather Beow: the son of a king who, knowing he would one day succeed, was able to secure his position by deeds while young. Thus, Hrothgar's epithet of 'good king' does not so much reflect the effects of his reign, but rather acknowledges the limitations that inevitably came with his kingship. In other words, Hrothgar is a good king because he attempted to make the best possible (i.e. the wisest) decisions under difficult and unforeseen circumstances.

This idea leaves us with one of Hrothgar's more controversial decisions, his apparent adoption of Beowulf as his heir. As Malcolm Brennan has noted, Hrothgar imperils his kingdom and family when he designates Beowulf as his son, an action which his wife Wealhtheow later seeks to remedy.<sup>122</sup> After the defeat of Grendel, Hrothgar says:

Nu ic Beowulf, þec,  
 secg bet(e)sta, me for sunu wylle  
 freogan on ferhþe. Heald forð tela  
 niwe sibbe. Ne bið þe (n)ænigre gad  
 worolde wilna, þe ic geweald hæbbe. (ll. 946b–949)

Now I, Beowulf,  
 best warrior, will love you as my son.  
 Henceforth hold well this new relationship.  
 There will not be any want for you  
 of the world's wealth over which I have power.

Hrothgar appears to adopt Beowulf, and Drout sees here a perfect example of an inheritance by deeds: "Inheritance by deeds is a more nebulous concept but is epitomized

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<sup>122</sup> Malcolm Brennan, "Hrothgar's Government", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 84.1 (Jan, 1985): 13–14.



by Hrothgar's attempt to nominate Beowulf as successor: the hero's deeds, rather than his lineage, allow him to be identified as a potential heir.”<sup>123</sup> While I agree that Hrothgar appears to welcome Beowulf into his family here, I suggest he does not actually intend to nominate Beowulf as his successor. A king who is, based on his earlier comments concerning his family and older brother, clearly aware of the importance of ruling based on *both* royal blood and deeds would be unlikely to then recklessly disinherit his own two sons. Instead I consider the words ‘þe ic geweald hæbbe’ (over which I have power), together with the context leant by his following words, to be of paramount importance for our understanding of Hrothgar’s intentions here. Hrothgar is generous with the wealth over which he, personally, has power; thus, this power is only present when he is actually *alive*. During this time, he will shower him with gifts, but the ties will be cut afterwards — unless the new king, Hrothgar’s son, continues them. The next part of Hrothgar’s speech further supports this interpretation:

Ful oft ic for læssan lean teohhode,  
 hordweorþunge hnahan rince,  
 sæmran æt sæcce. Ðu þe self hafast  
 dædum gefremed, þæt þin (dom) lyfað  
 awa to aldre. Alwalda þec  
 gode forgyldre, swa he nu gyt dyde!’ (ll. 951–956).

Very often have I assigned a reward for less,  
 Honoured with gifts a more unworthy warrior,  
 one weaker at war. You yourself have  
 performed deeds so that your actions will live  
 through eternity. May the Lord  
 reward with gifts, as he did just now!”

What Hrothgar is talking about specifically is honouring Beowulf with treasure during the king’s lifetime; Hrothgar does not expect Beowulf to become king at any point — whether of the Danes or the Geats —and hopes that God will reward him in another way. Notably, what these rewards will consist of exactly is unclear to Hrothgar too.

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<sup>123</sup> Drout, “Blood and Deeds”, 202.

That Hrothgar's words are certainly ambiguous and can easily be misinterpreted, however, becomes clear from his wife Wealhtheow's reaction:

“Onfoh þissum fulle, freodrihten min,  
 since brytta. Þu on sælum wes,  
 goldwine gumena, ond to Geatum spræc  
 mildum wordum, swa sceal man don.  
 Beo wið Geatas glæd, geofena gemyndig;  
 nean ond feorran þu nu hafast.  
 Me man sægde þæt þu ðe for sunu wolde  
 hereri(n)c habban. Heorot is gefælsod  
 beahsele beorhta; bruc, þenden þu mote,  
 manigra medo, ond þinum magum læf  
 folc ond rice, þonne ðu forð scyle  
 methodsceaft seon. (ll. 1169–1180a).

Take this cup, my noble lord,  
 dispenser of treasure. Be joyful,  
 liberal prince of men, and speak to the Geats  
 with mild words, as a man must do.  
 Be gracious towards the Geats, mindful of gifts;  
 Near and far you now have power.  
 Someone said to me that you wanted for yourself as a son  
 to have the warrior. Heorot is cleansed,  
 the brilliant treasure-hall. Use, while you can,  
 your many rewards, and bequeath to your own kinsmen  
 the people and the kingdom, when you must go forth,  
 find your fate after death.

Wealhtheow is clearly concerned that Hrothgar intends to leave his kingdom to Beowulf, who would then effectively succeed based on the great service he has done the old king. Instead, she suggests, reward him heavily, but leave the kingdom to your family. It is a pity, and suggestive of the often tragic and powerless roles of the women in the poem, that Hrothgar does not reply to this speech. Based on the poem's speeches in the first half

of the poem, Orchard concludes that “Wealhtheow’s words have hit home.”<sup>124</sup> On the contrary, I raise the possibility that Wealhtheow’s speech is based on a misinterpretation of Hrothgar’s words. After all, she herself hints that she wasn’t present during the speech, but that ‘me man sægde’ (someone said to me). Her husband’s silence could suggest he considers her words to be a straightforward factual statement: he *does* intend to bequeath his kingdom to his son. However, considering the poem’s interest in agency and its limits, and the tragic fates of other queens such as Hrothgar’s daughter Freawaru, and Hildeburh, it appears more likely that Wealhtheow’s concerns are simply dismissed, her role that of a commentator on rather than an agent in her own family’s fortunes. It would be interesting (though perhaps not particularly fruitful) to speculate as to the identity of the person who told her about Hrothgar’s promise to Beowulf. Wealhtheow wrongfully trusts Hrothulf, and she is probably mistaken again as to her husband’s intentions for his succession. I consider it doubtful that Hrothgar, praised as a wise king who repeatedly contemplates both past and future, would have been so foolish as to actually intend to promise Beowulf his kingdom. In any case, judging by subsequent events, Beowulf does not seem to have interpreted the king’s speech in this way.

#### 1.4.2. Hrothgar’s relationship with his people

Another important aspect of Hrothgar’s good kingship, and a sign of his wisdom, is his relationship with his people. There are two elements here that require discussion: the close relationship he has with his advisers, and the generosity he shows towards his retainers. Both of these relationships, though the latter in a more obvious way, are based on the reciprocity between a lord and his people. This reciprocity is crucial, as it functions as the foundation of a stable and prospering kingdom.<sup>125</sup>

The displays of generosity in *Beowulf* find resonance in the importance attached to it in early medieval England. As Scott Gwara has noted, “The extent of this reciprocity—the king’s generosity, significantly—determined the stability of the warband relationship and the corresponding strength of the kingdom.”<sup>126</sup> More specifically, this relationship required specific behaviours from both lord and followers: “In the early

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<sup>124</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 222.

<sup>125</sup> Gwara notes a change here with earlier Germanic lord-people relationships. Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 42–43.

<sup>126</sup> Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 44.

Scandinavian society depicted in *Beowulf*, the king supported loyal retainers through the giving of treasure, the hosting of feasts, and the building of mead-halls. Retainers —the thanes— were expected in turn to risk their lives in military service to the king. Being a good retainer was marked by the receiving of gifts.”<sup>127</sup> The three elements connected to the king’s side of the bargain are interesting here, as the poet connects all of them to Hrothgar at the same time — and early on in the poem:

scop him Heort naman,  
 se þe his wordes geweald wide hæfde.  
 He beot ne aleh, beagas dælde,  
 sinc æt symle. Sele hlifade,  
 heah ond horngeap. Heaðowylma bad,  
 laðan liges — Ne wæs hit lenge þa gen  
 þæt se ecghete aþumsweoran,  
 æfter wælniðe wæcnan scolde.  
 Ða se ellengæst earfoðlice  
 þrage geþolode, se þe in þystrum bad,  
 þæt he dogora gehwam dream gehyrde  
 hludne in healle. (ll. 78b–89a).

He named it Heorot,  
 he who widely held the power of his word.  
 He did not leave his promise unfulfilled, he shared out rings,  
 treasures at the feast. The hall towered,  
 high and horn-gabled. It waited for battle-surges,  
 hostile flames. Nor was it at all long  
 that hostile hate had to swear oaths,  
 had to arise after murderous violence.  
 Then the bold demon reluctantly  
 suffered distress, he who abided in the darkness,  
 So that he on each day heard joy

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<sup>127</sup> Lisa G. Rapaport, Catherine E. Paul, Patrick Gerrard, “Hwæt!: adaptive benefits of public displays of generosity and bravery in *Beowulf*”, *Behaviour* 153 (2016): 1334.

loudly in the hall.

Two interesting things happen in this passage. First of all, it indicates all the three elements a king had to provide in the relationship with his retainers: he builds a mead-hall, he hands out treasure, and he holds feasts (which he also uses to distribute this treasure). Hrothgar is, therefore, quickly established as an ideal lord in this respect. It is telling that the passage is immediately followed by a warning of the dangers and suffering that will be caused by Grendel. Grendel, outside of the hall, thus literally an outsider, is disturbed by the close bond of reciprocity that binds Hrothgar and his people. He is an outsider twice over:

Wæs se grimma gæst    Grendel haten,  
 mære mearcstapa,    se þe moras heold,  
 fen ond fæsten;    fifelcynnes eard  
 wonsæli wer    weardode hwile,  
 siþðan him scyppen.    forscifen hæfde  
 in Caines cynne (ll. 102–107a).

That grim demon was called Grendel,  
 an infamous walker of the border-land, who occupied the moors,  
 fens and fastness. The dwelling place of monsters  
 the unblest man kept for a while,  
 from when the Creator had doomed him  
 among Cain's race.

Grendel has been condemned by God, placing him outside of the reach of Christian redemption, while he also does not have a secular lord. His situation is reminiscent of the theme of the exile, prevalent throughout Old English poetry. Whereas other poems, however, tend to end with a glimpse of hope (usually provided by the comfort the exile finds in God, for instance in *the Wanderer*),<sup>128</sup> such hope clearly does not exist for

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<sup>128</sup>     *The Wanderer* ends with the lines: “Wel bið þam þe him are seceð, / frofre to fæder on heofonum, / þær us eal seo fæstnung stondeð.” (ll. 114b–115b; It is better for the one who seeks mercy / consolation from the Father in the heavens / where stability stands for all of us). “The

Grendel. The poet, then, does not only explore the workings of reciprocity by considering those within society, but also those outside of society. Grendel's existence on the margins of society is highlighted by the space he inhabits. He walks the 'borderland,' and the references to 'mære' and 'moras' (border-land and moors), spaces populated by monsters, are portrayed as dark and unpleasant but also as fundamentally unknowable —and therefore frightening.<sup>129</sup> Grendel's lonely 'outsiderness,' following on directly from the sense of unity and purpose depicted in Heorot, thus highlights the importance of the mutual dependency between a lord and his people. It marks the difference between belonging and not-belonging. The fact that Hrothgar is able to build Heorot, this very symbol of reciprocity and cohesion, is therefore also a symbol of his authority as a ruler. Heorot, then, is the place where reciprocity is on public display, and where it becomes clear who does and who does not belong.

Hrothgar's relationship with his advisers is of central importance when it comes to the poet's depiction of his authority. As Gwara notes: "the unsuccessful king... would fail to consult his men —or at least appreciate their political stake in decisions that jeopardized their lives or prestige."<sup>130</sup> A good king, therefore, takes in advice, showing due consideration for their role in building and maintaining the kingdom's social cohesion. Hrothgar's authority is therefore strengthened by the fact that he takes his advisers seriously. He is described, for instance, as sitting in counsel to discuss what could be done against Grendel:

Monig oft gesæt  
 rice to rune;    ræd eahtedon,  
 hwæt swiðferhðum    selest wære  
 wið færgryrum    to gefremmanne. (ll. 171b–174).

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Wanderer", in *The Exeter Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie (London: Columbia University Press, 1936), 134–135. This notion ties in with the Old English concern with change and stability, already discussed. In the Christian Anglo-Saxon worldview, life on earth becomes fraught with change, whereas true stability can only be found in heaven. Consequently, Grendel, being a descendent from Cain, cannot hope to ever find stability, and will remain an exile even in death.

<sup>129</sup> On this, see Alexandra Bolintineanu, "Declarations of Unknowing in *Beowulf*", *Neophilologus* 100.4 (2016): 631–647.

<sup>130</sup> Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 43.

Many often sat down  
powerful to counsel; they considered advice,  
what for the brave-hearted would be best  
to do against sudden attacks.

Despite the fact that no solution has been forthcoming for twelve years, Hrothgar still contemplates his options with his counsellors. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the death of his most trusted adviser, Æschere, at the hands of Grendel, hits the old king so hard:

Hroðgar mæpelode, helm Scyldinga:  
“Ne frin þu æfter sælum! Sorh is geniwod  
Denigea leodum: dead is Æschere,  
Yrmenlafes yldra broþor,  
min runwita ond min rædbora,  
eaxlgestealla, ðonne we on orlege  
hafelan weredon, þonne hniton feþan,  
eoferas cnysedan. Swylc scolde eorl wesan,  
(ætheling) ærgod, swylc Æschere wæs. (ll. 1321–1329)

Hrothgar spoke, lord of the Scyldings  
“Do not enquire after happiness. Sorrow is renewed  
for the Danish people. Æschere is dead,  
Yrmenlaf’s older brother,  
my counsellor and my trusted advisor,  
my comrade in arms, when in battle we  
protected our heads when foot-soldiers clashed,  
beat against boar-helms just as a warrior should  
be good of old, such was Æschere.

Hrothgar here hints at the deeper meaning and importance the relationship between a lord and retainer could have. He grieves not only for the death of a most trusted counsellor, but also for a man who, when they were younger, had been his companion in war. It is not difficult to see Æschere as one of the young men Hrothgar, like his grandfather Beow,

would have surrounded himself with while still a prince. That their bond remained strong and loyal is therefore a credit to Hrothgar's good kingship. The death of such a man is, then, not just a loss for Hrothgar himself, but as he says a loss for the Danes as a people. The fact that he names Æschere twice, both at the start and the end of his lament, also hints at the depth of Hrothgar's personal despair at the loss of his old friend.<sup>131</sup> Despite the tragic ending, then, Hrothgar's speech here shows an ideal relationship between lord and retainer.

Indeed, advisers play an important role in Hrothgar's reign. It becomes clear that, Hrothgar's static presence in Heorot notwithstanding, he has a wide network of advisers who travel to his court.

Ic þæt londbuend,    leode mine,  
 selerædende    secgan hyrde,  
 þæt hie gesawon    swylce twegen  
 micle mearcstapan    moras healdan (ll. 1345–1348)

I have heard tell about that land-dwellers,  
 my people, hall-counsellors,  
 that they have seen such two  
 great mark-steppers holding the moors

Hrothgar's references to his counsellors show that he keeps in close contact with them and relies on them to inform and support him. The importance of keeping counsel is attested in several pre-Conquest texts, and appears to remain a concern throughout the period. Bishop Wulfstan (d. 1023), for instance, writes in his *Institutes of Polity* that a good king must "pursue wisdom with his council."<sup>132</sup> He also mentions "good counsel"

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<sup>131</sup> As several scholars have noted, Aeschere is not mentioned at all before his death at the hands of Grendel's mother. Victor Scherb writes that "the technique of withholding his name also magnifies the impact of his close relationship to Hrothgar when it is made manifest." Victor Scherb, "Shoulder-Companions and Shoulders in *Beowulf*", in *Masculinities and Femininities in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Frederick Kiefer (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 34.

<sup>132</sup> Andrew Rabin, ed. and trans., *The Political Writings of Archbishop Wulfstan of York* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015), 104.



as one of the “eight columns which firmly support lawful kingship.”<sup>133</sup> In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*’s 755 annal detailing the story of Cynewulf and Cyneheard, also discussed above, the importance of major decisions being made together with a ruler’s advisers is underscored. The first sentence reads: “In this year Cynewulf and the councillors of the West-Saxons deprived Sigeberht of his kingdom, apart from Hampshire, because of unjust deeds.”<sup>134</sup> As Barbara Yorke has noted, it is significant that Cynewulf undertook what is essentially an act of rebellion with the consent of his witan.<sup>135</sup> In indicating that Hrothgar does not manage to reach a solution even after conferring with his advisers the poet underlines the hopelessness of his situation, and at the same time exonerates Hrothgar partially from his responsibility for not being able to stop Grendel; he has done everything he could. Hrothgar’s advice-seeking contrasts with Beowulf’s behaviour in this regard, as I will discuss later.

Hrothgar seems to warn Beowulf against failing to seek counsel when he presents him with an example of a ‘bad’ king. Bad kings ultimately fail because they do not work in consultation and cooperation with their men, which can lead them to remain untroubled by the dangers facing their kingdoms.

Wunað he on wiste,    no hine wiht dweleð  
 adl ne ylðo,    ne him inwitsorh  
 on sefan sweorceð,    ne gesacu ohwær,  
 ecghete eoweð,    ac him eal worold  
 wendeð on willan;    He þæt wyrse ne con (1735–1739)

He indulges his desires; illness and old age  
 mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled  
 by envy or malice or the thought of enemies  
 with their hate-honed swords. The whole world  
 conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst...

<sup>133</sup> Rabin, *Political Writings*, 105.

<sup>134</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 3: MS A*. Ed. Janet Bately, Gen. Eds. David Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1986), 36.

<sup>135</sup> Barbara Yorke, “The Representation of Early West Saxon History in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle”, in *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, History, Literature*, ed. Alice Jorgensen (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 210), 143.

Not seeking the citizens' honest advice, Hrothgar seems to say, makes a ruler blind to the dangers that surround him.

To gain this cooperation, generosity is one of the most important tools for a ruler. As Barbara Yorke has noted, "such giving of gifts to reinforce power was part of the language of overlordship throughout Britain and Ireland."<sup>136</sup> That a ruler's distribution of treasure in *Beowulf* is almost always a public act suggests that it is not just about the actual transaction, the rewarding of a loyal retainer, but that it also serves a social function. The act of giving is public because even those who do not receive anything, or receive less than others, need to see the inherent message: serve your lord well and you'll receive a (better) reward. Gift-giving is, therefore, a crucial function of early medieval kingship, and features at key moments in the poem.

The importance of generosity in the context of early medieval kingship is also apparent in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*. Yet Patrick Wormald saw heroic poetry as an important alternative view to Bede: "it is possible to find evidence in Bede that the world of *Beowulf* was the same world as that whose history Bede is telling, but Bede's is an *Ecclesiastical History*: secular heroes, court life, warfare in general, had no place in the tradition, and monsters still less of one."<sup>137</sup> Rather, Wormald saw heroic literature as providing "a window on the mentality of a warrior aristocracy."<sup>138</sup> While other sources may bear traces of this mentality, he wrote, they do not present its concerns.<sup>139</sup> I agree, but I suggest that regarding notions of kingship Bede does not so much provide an alternative view, as an alternative set of priorities. In other words, Bede approaches his kings from a Christian perspective, judging kings based on their affinity for or campaigns against the early Christian Church in England. In doing so, however, similarities between views on royal authority emerge in the *Historia* and *Beowulf*. Generosity has an important part to play, as can be seen in the case of King Oswald. First, Bede relates the extent of his power:

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<sup>136</sup> Yorke, "Kings and Kingship", 80.

<sup>137</sup> Patrick Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy", in *The Times of Bede: Studies in Early English Christian Society and its Historian*, ed. Patrick Wormald and Stephen Baxter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 34.

<sup>138</sup> Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf*", 34.

<sup>139</sup> Wormald, "Bede, *Beowulf*", 34.

Denique omnes nationes et prouincias Brittaniae, quae in quattuor linguas, id est Brettonum Pictorum Scottorum et Anglorum, diuisae sunt, in ditione accepit.<sup>140</sup>

In fact he held under his sway all the peoples and kingdoms of Britain, divided among the speakers of four different languages, British, Pictish, Irish, and English.<sup>141</sup>

Bede often links the extent of his exemplary rulers' domains with their piety, and Oswald is no exception.<sup>142</sup> As an example of the king's generosity, Bede writes:

Denique fertur quia tempore quodam, cum die sancto paschae cum praefato episcopo consedisset ad prandium, positusque esset in mensa coram eo discus argenteus regalibus epulis refertus et iamiamque essent manus ad panem benedicendum missuri, intrasse subito ministrum ipsius, cui suscipiendorum inopum erat cura deligata, et indicasse regi quia multitudo pauperum undecumque adueniens maxima per plateas sederet, postulans aliquid elimosynae a rege. Qui mox dapes sibimet adpositas deferri pauperibus, sed et discum confringi, atque eisdem minutatim diuidi praecepit.<sup>143</sup>

For example, the story is told that on a certain occasion, one Easter Day, when he had sat down to dinner with Bishop Aidan, a silver dish was placed on the table before him full of rich foods. They had just raised their hands to ask a blessing on the bread when there came in an officer of the king, whose duty it was to relieve the needy, telling him that a very great multitude of poor people

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<sup>140</sup> Latin citations and translations of the *Historia* are from: Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, eds. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Here: Book III. 6, 230.

<sup>141</sup> Book III.6, 231.

<sup>142</sup> Another example is Edwin, Oswald's predecessor: "Cui uidelicet regi, in auspiciis suscipiendae fidei et regni caelestis, potestas etiam terreni creuerat imperii, ita ut quod nemo Anglorum ante eum, omnes Brittaniae fines, quae uel ipsorum uel Brettonum prouinciae habitabant, sub ditione acciperet" (The king's earthly power had increased as an augury that he was to become a believer and have a share in the heavenly kingdom. So, like no other English king before him, he held under his sway the whole realm of Britain, not only the English kingdoms but those ruled over by the Britons as well" (II.9, 162–163).

<sup>143</sup> Book III.6, 230.

from every district were sitting in the precincts and asking alms of the king. He at once ordered the dainties which had been set in front of him to be carried to the poor, the dish to be broken up, and the pieces divided amongst them.<sup>144</sup>

This kind of generosity, however, is quite different from the one encountered in *Beowulf*. Whereas *Beowulf's* pagan characters use gift-giving to establish and maintain relationships, expressing gratitude and (ideally) securing loyalty, Christian kings' beneficence does not extend to the establishment of a mutually beneficial relationship with the people who are on the receiving end but does almost the opposite: it makes the king stand out and strengthens the Christian character of his rule. Indeed, as Higham has noted, "At the core lie messages concerning the furthering of Christianity via active co-operation between king, bishop and papacy, with royal authority harnessed to provide the necessary secular support to drive forward a Christianising agenda."<sup>145</sup> The example relating to generosity may appear to suggest that Bede's and *Beowulf's* visions of kingship are mutually exclusive, because they are set in a completely different context.<sup>146</sup> Nonetheless, as poems such as the *Dream of the Rood* show, heroic warrior values and Christian morality were not necessarily opposed.<sup>147</sup> For instance, Bede's Christian message does not come into conflict with his views on military action. As George Hardin Brown has argued, "The greatest Anglo-Saxon kings of Bede's England are the most violent: the most powerful are the most tragic; and the greatest contributors to the discipline of the Church, like Oswiu of Northumbria (642–670), are covered with the blood of slain relatives."<sup>148</sup> Indeed, Bede interpreted the English take-over of Britain as similar to the Roman invasion of Britain, and subsequently awarded his favourite English rulers with Roman qualities. Thus, he positioned the English as legitimate successors of

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<sup>144</sup> Book III.6, 231.

<sup>145</sup> Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 151.

<sup>146</sup> I will not go into the Christian context of *Beowulf* here. For a brief overview and discussion of the poem's Pagan and Christian elements and interpretations see Richard Bodek, "Beowulf", *The Explicator* 62.3 (2004): 130–132.

<sup>147</sup> See Larry Benson, "The Pagan Coloring of Beowulf", in *the Beowulf reader*, ed. Peter Baker (New York: Routledge, 2000), 35–50.

<sup>148</sup> George Hardin Brown, "Royal and Ecclesiastical Rivalries in Bede's *History*", *Renascence* 52.1 (Fall 1999): 20.

Rome.<sup>149</sup> This interpretation includes the promotion of warrior-like qualities in a king. What distinguishes Bede's kings from Beowulf's pagan kings, however, is once more how these royal qualities support and relate to a king's relationship with his advisers and retainers. Indeed, the role of a king's subjects in Bede is diminished considerably, as they become passive recipients of one king's generosity, or passive victims of another king's unwillingness to convert to Christianity. Advisers become important only when they advise or instruct a king in his religion. An exception can be found in the case of Edwin who, before converting, decides to "confer about this with his loyal chief men and his counsellors so that, if they agreed with him, they might all be consecrated together in the waters of life."<sup>150</sup> (Uerum adhuc cum amicis principibus et consiliariis suis sese de hoc conlaturum esse dicebat, ut, si et illi eadem cum eo sentire uellent, omnes pariter in fonte uitae Christo consecrarentur;...).<sup>151</sup> Here Bede gives us an example of consent and cooperation between an English king and his people. It should be noted that Bede does not condemn this course of action, even though much is at stake for the Christian Church in England. Indeed, Edwin's actions here are reminiscent of Hrothgar's deliberations with his advisers to discuss Grendel's continued attacks. A king who involves his people in important decisions is a wise king, even if he discusses a matter as important as his kingdom's conversion.

Hrothgar's kingship, then, is characterised by the nourishment and appreciation of wisdom. Hrothgar portrays both of its aspects: he is aware of his past, and is capable and willing to contemplate the future. It is important in this that he *has* a past, and a clear royal bloodline, unlike his great-grandfather Scyld. Despite his philosophical nature, however, he is, in the end, still human. He can contemplate the future, and prepare, but the poet shows us that there are no guarantees. Unexpected things can happen, circumstances may change, and no one can ever be completely in control. What makes Hrothgar a good king is that he is not discouraged by this, but accepts the facts of life and 'wyrd,' and does whatever is in his power to adapt. Most importantly, he takes the relationship with his people seriously, understanding the importance of reciprocity for the welfare of his kingdom.

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<sup>149</sup> N.J. Higham, *An English Empire: Bede and the early Anglo-Saxon kings*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 22–40.

<sup>150</sup> Book II.13, 183.

<sup>151</sup> Book II.13, 182.

## 1.5. Beowulf

### 1.5.1. From Hero to King

The last of the three ‘good kings,’ Beowulf, is also last one of his line, his death signalling not only the end of the poem but also of his royal dynasty. As previously discussed, each ‘good king’ attempts to do the best he can given his circumstances. Scyld gains followers and expands his kingdom, but his bloodline is obscure. Hrothgar is wise, and the son of a king, but he is a younger son —a situation which probably did not allow him to prepare for kingship. Now Hrothgar is old he needs to rely on the strength of outsiders, heroes such as *Beowulf*. Scholars have often pointed out the different, if not directly contrasting, requirements of a hero and a king. Leyerle, for instance, has called it “a fatal contradiction at the core of heroic society.”<sup>152</sup> He has summarised the tension as follows: “The hero follows a code that exalts indomitable will and valour in the individual, but society requires a king who acts for the common good, not for his own glory.”<sup>153</sup> Other scholars, more recently, have reevaluated this view. Oren Falk, for instance, acknowledges that the stability a king was expected to provide was indeed “incommensurable” with the heroic desire for fame and glory.<sup>154</sup> Importantly, Falk points out that the literature is aware of this. However, Falk continues to state that “despite the Beowulf poet’s moralizing protestations and despite the unexamined royalist prejudice of modern readers, I maintain that the poem actually shows a social system which has little use for kings.”<sup>155</sup> He concludes that “*Beowulf* depicts a society in which the aristocratic principle of meritocracy ultimately prevails over the royal principle of heredity.”<sup>156</sup> I do not agree with the assessment that the *Beowulf* poet demonstrates a predilection for meritocracy rather than royalty. Beowulf is offered the throne by Hygd based on merit (though he declines), and it is based on merit that Hrothgar appears to want to adopt him. Yet when he does take the throne, and rules well for fifty years, his merit is clearly not enough. The only character who, as far as we can tell, does rule on merit is Scyld. This is by necessity too: he does not have a bloodline, and therefore no royal ancestors to provide him with a genealogy. Moreover, the discussion of Scyld’s kingship and that of his successors is

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<sup>152</sup> Leyerle, “Beowulf”, 89.

<sup>153</sup> Leyerle, “Beowulf”, 89.

<sup>154</sup> Oren Falk, “A Dark Age Peter Principle: Beowulf’s Incompetence Threshold”, *EME* 18 (2010): 11–12.

<sup>155</sup> Falk, “A Dark Age”, 11–12.

<sup>156</sup> Falk, “A Dark Age”, 19.

described in terms of continuity. Kingship based on merit alone would lack this continuity: there would be no son being raised during his father's kingship, gaining experience along the way, learning how to attract and keep his followers. The poet is not saying that the system of kingship is perfect; rather, he outlines all sorts of difficulties that may arise, difficulties with which not even good kings can always deal properly. As such, merit is certainly important — inheritance by deeds has its role to play, as discussed above. But this merit is, ideally, firmly controlled within the framework of continuity provided by a royal line, of which Beow is the prime example. This continuity has effects on the relationships between lord and subjects. As John Hill has noted, paying tribute was incredibly important: it was a way to subjugate other tribes, expand one's empire and wealth, without having to kill all. But upon the death of the king these tribes may then rise against those who subjugated them. As a result, we have another reason why it is important to have a son.<sup>157</sup> Continuity is created not merely by the existence of such a son, but also by this son having 'learned his father's trade' while young. Heremod, on the other hand, could be seen as an example of why merit should be the first and foremost concern. It should be noted, however, that he does not begin his reign as a bad king, but only becomes one later in life. According to Kaske, this is due to the fact that he did not cultivate wisdom.<sup>158</sup> This is probably the reason why Hrothgar uses him as an example for Beowulf — a lesson that Beowulf, focussed as he is on the here and now, does not learn. In brief, characteristics that are good for a king at a certain period of his reign may later prove to be damaging to his people, depending, as ever, on the circumstances. Falk is right though to emphasise the fact that these heroes do not work in a vacuum: they are not lone warriors, but their actions are embedded in, reflect, and serve not only the societies that raise them but also others, just as Beowulf the Geat comes to the rescue of Hrothgar the Dane.

Thus, throughout the poem the audience is given a profound and perceptive picture of heroism and kingship, and the characterisation of Beowulf is arguably the most complex. I suggest that the tension between the duties of a king and the duties of a hero do not have to come into conflict directly. Instead, what we are shown is that a good king takes on heroic qualities and *repurposes* them. This is what Hrothgar did — he was a brave

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<sup>157</sup> John Hill, *The Narrative Pulse of Beowulf: Arrivals and Departures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>158</sup> Kaske, "Sapientia et Fortitudo", 435.

warrior in his youth, who integrated these qualities with those expected of him as king. As will be shown, however, Beowulf as a king does not seem to grasp the importance of continuity. His relationships with Hrothgar first and his people later show how he fails to understand that cooperation and continuity are at the heart of a king's authority. In the end, what Beowulf lacks is the kind of wisdom that Hrothgar had tried to instill in him.

To assess Beowulf's role as hero it is important to first consider what exactly constitutes a hero, or heroic behaviour, in Old English literature. Two elements appear to be recurrent in heroic poetry: the hero is usually defending something (i.e. not attacking), and the opposition is not as simple as good versus evil: many stories are complicated by the fact that the hero has a relative or close friend fighting on the other side (as in, for instance, *Cynewulf and Cyneheard*).<sup>159</sup> While the second element is not directly relevant to the poem, the first is not just relevant but also important. Beowulf is a hero because he defends Heorot. Indeed, even when he realises that Grendel has entered the hall at night, Beowulf is not the first to strike:

Þryðswyð beheold  
 mæg Higelaces,    hu se manscaða  
 under færgripum    gefaran wolde.  
 Ne þæt se aglæca    yldan þohte,  
 ac he gefeng hraðe    forman siðe  
 slæpendne rinc,    slat unwearnum,  
 bat banlocan,    blod edrum dranc,  
 synsnædum swealh (ll. 735b–742a)

The mighty one observed,  
 the kinsman of Hygelac, how the evil-doer  
 would proceed under sudden attacks.  
 Not that the opponent intended to delay,  
 but he quickly seized with the first chance  
 a sleeping warrior, eagerly tore,  
 bit the bone-locker, drank the bloodstreams,  
 swallowed huge morsels.

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<sup>159</sup> Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 27.



It is only after Beowulf has observed Grendel devouring one of his warriors that he springs into action. His heroism here is contrasted sharply with Grendel's actions; Grendel deals in 'sudden attacks,' a tactic which does not offer a fair fight and is therefore the opposite of heroic.

There is more to Beowulf's heroism, and heroism in a more general Old English literary context, than being a good defender. His courage and strength make him stand out, and he seeks to use these characteristics in order to gain glory and fame. When he first speaks to Hrothgar, Beowulf makes this clear: he recounts his previous acts of strength, mentioning how he has fought (and defeated) monstrous creatures before.<sup>160</sup> Nonetheless, despite Beowulf's recounted and demonstrated courage, his character has remained contested by scholars.<sup>161</sup> These readings are influenced by ideas about his motivation—does he act for his own glory, or does he genuinely seek to help Hrothgar? Much in this discussion is related to the Christianity of the audience, and their interpretation of secular heroic values. I will not delve into this discussion here. Rather, I will pick up on a point Gwara has made, namely that some of the characters Beowulf encounters express their doubts about where his heroic qualities may lead. This idea is commensurate with another point, namely that at times Beowulf himself seems to become almost monstrous; the way he tears off Grendel's arm, for instance, indicates a strength that is beyond human, and makes an audience think about the negative potential this kind of strength could have:

At the inflection point of heroic eminence, then, Beowulf's motivations engender anxieties about his present and future conduct—the potential for immoderation that he seems to express. While some are satisfied with Beowulf's sense of heroic proportion, more skeptical observers fear the prospect of latent recklessness that can accompany matchless strength and uninhibited zeal. These characters mistrust Beowulf's potential for excessive ambition, as much for themselves as for him. For them Beowulf is an enigmatic figure whose incommensurate power they admire and fear.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> ll. 417–424.

<sup>161</sup> For a succinct overview, see Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 1–58.

<sup>162</sup> Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 13.

Some of Beowulf's heroic qualities, then, might make wise men such as Hrothgar concerned about potential recklessness, especially when untempered by wisdom.

None of these features, however, are necessarily incompatible with kingship—if they are curbed in youth. The ideal is that Beowulf should learn from his exploits, the way a young prince learns while growing up under his father's rule. I suggest that the poet builds in these 'learning moments' in the tales of Sigemund and Heremod, the latter occurring in a speech commonly known as Hrothgar's sermon. They serve to teach the hero a specific lesson each time, and their structure indicates particular concerns with Beowulf's heroic qualities and their use in the long-term—especially as a leader of his people. These lessons, thus, each reflect Beowulf's actions as interpreted by those who understand and value the importance of continuity.

### 1.5.2. The Lesson of Sigemund

The first example, taking place after the defeat of Grendel, is presented by a man who tells the tale of the hero Sigemund. Its content fits the royal court's interpretation of Beowulf's actions against Grendel, and the brief mention of Heremod following it directly provides a contrast with Sigemund and Beowulf. The poet begins by mentioning Sigemund's many heroic actions, and the fact that the hero fights alongside his nephew Fitela, to whom he also recounts his previous deeds. We then hear of Sigemund's battle with a dragon:

Sigemunde gesprong  
 æfter deaðdæge    dom unlytel  
 syþðan wiges heard    wyrn acwealde,  
 hordes hyrde.    He under harne stan  
 æpelinges bearn,    ana geneoðde  
 frecne dæde,    ne wæs him Fitela mid;  
 hwæpre him gesælde    ðæt þæt swurd þurhwod  
 wrætlicne wyrn,    þæt hit on wealle ætstod,  
 dryhtlic iren;    draca morðre swealt. (ll. 883b–891)

For Sigemund arose  
 after his day of death not a little glory.

When brave in battle he killed a dragon,  
 guardian of treasure, he behind an old stone  
 the prince's son dared alone  
 a reckless deed, nor was Fitela with him.  
 However it befell him that the sword went through  
 the wondrous dragon so that it stood fixed on the wall,  
 noble iron. The dragon died through murder.

This passage has often been used to elucidate Beowulf's own character. M.S. Griffith states that, despite the fact that the poet does not make the exact comparison very clear, most critics are in agreement that the Sigemund episode "compliments" Beowulf, whereas the following reference to the Danish king Heremod does the opposite.<sup>163</sup> Griffith discusses the similarities between Sigemund and Beowulf, and argues that the comparison is not as straightforward as it seems. Indeed, while Beowulf also fights a dragon and gains glory, he dies in the attempt. Interestingly, Griffith suggests that "it is worthy of note, too, that, if the poet meant the two dragon-slayings to be linked, that the first account is so brief (by comparison with some of the other digressions), that the poet never returns to Sigemund..."<sup>164</sup> He concludes that Beowulf is at once portrayed like and unlike Sigemund.<sup>165</sup> While it is certainly interesting that the digression is relatively short, I suggest that this does not matter when we consider the episode as not only a story for comparison, but also as foreshadowing, as a warning for and about Beowulf. The fact that Beowulf is not actually present when this story is told only adds to the tension this interpretation provides. As I will discuss later, one of the lessons Hrothgar attempts to teach Beowulf is the importance of looking back to the past, of knowing which predecessors to emulate and which to avoid. Beowulf's actions as king, when he himself faces the dragon, suggest an unfamiliarity with the tale of Sigemund as told in the passage above or (even worse) a disregard of the lessons that he could have drawn from it, had he known the story.

Notably, by the time Beowulf faces this dragon, he is a king rather than a hero. And yet, his behaviour is more like that of a hero again at this point: in his speech to his

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<sup>163</sup> Griffith, M.S. "Some difficulties in *Beowulf*, lines 874–902: Sigemund reconsidered", *Anglo-Saxon England* 24 (December 1995): 11.

<sup>164</sup> Griffith, "Some difficulties", 33–34.

<sup>165</sup> Griffith, "Some difficulties", 40.

retainers before he faces the dragon, he expresses his wish to ‘mærðum fremman’ (l. 2515a; earn renown). I will come back to this speech later. In the passage above Sigemund is presented as an exemplary hero, and yet he has no qualms about bringing his sword. Unlike Sigemund, Beowulf does not bring armour to his fight with the dragon. Like Sigemund, he does go by himself. The crucial difference is that Sigemund was a hero when he fought the dragon, and Beowulf was not.

### 1.5.3. Hrothgar’s sermon: Heremod

The passage on Sigemund is immediately followed by the first mention of Heremod, whose behaviour is set as an example of bad kingship. The start of his rule, we are told, was promising, but “Hine fyren onwod” (l. 914b; sin seized him). Heremod returns at more length in a later speech by Hrothgar, where we are given more details concerning his predecessor. Indeed, Hrothgar specifically says he intends this to be a lesson for Beowulf:

Ne wearð Heremod swa  
 eaforum Ecgwelan,    Ar-Scyldingum;  
 Ne geweax he him to willan,    ac to wælfalle  
 ond to deaðcwalum    Deniga leodum;  
 breat bolgenmod    beodgeneatas,  
 eaxlgesteallan,    oþ þæt he ana hwearf,  
 mære þeoden,    mondreamum from.  
 Deah þe hine mihtig God    mægenes Wynnnum,  
 eafepum steppe    ofer ealle men,  
 forð gefremede,    hwæþere him on ferhþe greow  
 breosthord blodreow,    nallas beagas geaf  
 Denum æfter dome;    dreamleas gebad,  
 þæt he þæs gewinnes    weorc þrowade,  
 leodbealo longsum.    Ðu þe lær be þon,  
 gumcyste ongit;    ic þis gid be þe  
 awræc wintrum frod. (ll. 1709b–1724a).

Heremod was not like that  
 to the men of Ecgwela, the honour-Scyldings.

Nor had he grown as wished, but for slaughter  
 and for violent death among the Danish people.  
 Enraged, he killed his table-companions,  
 fellow warriors, until he went all alone,  
 the famous prince, from the pleasures of man  
 although mighty God had in strength's joys  
 in might exalted over all men,  
 advanced him. However in his spirit grew  
 a cruel heart. Not at all did he give rings  
 to the Danes according to judgment. Joyless he endured,  
 so that he for that fight suffered distress,  
 A people's long-lasting pain. You yourself learn from that  
 understand manly virtue. I this story for you  
 recited, old and wise.

The disaster of Heremod's kingship arises mainly from his negative relationship with his people.<sup>166</sup> Firstly, he turned against his own men — rather than nurturing a mutually beneficial relationship of loyalty and trust, he kills those closest to him. In addition, he was ungenerous, as he did not distribute rings as a good king ought. Like Beowulf, Heremod was granted enormous strength, but he used it badly. Hrothgar's advice, then, is to use one's powers well and to the benefit of one's subjects. Interestingly, Hrothgar does not merely highlight the suffering of the people, but also that of Heremod himself. He lived 'joyless,' and was all alone.

It appears that Beowulf heeds these lessons as king, at least superficially. While he is known for his generosity, and his people seem to love him, he does seem to be more concerned with his own glory than the needs of his people. Sarah Higley, however, has argued that an audience was not supposed to identify directly with Beowulf, but to learn from him. Higley states that she cannot identify with a hero who is so seemingly disregarding the needs of his people: "To adjust that perception, I must understand that identification is yet another cultural performance in Old English, which entails

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<sup>166</sup> Scherb sees a parallel between Heremod and Grendel and his mother here. By killing those whom he should have trusted and be close to, Heremod rejects society and chooses exile, and becomes a figure of hatred. Scherb, "Shoulder-Companions and Shoulders", 40–41.

observation and emulation of the hero, not ‘occupying his head,’ not wishing to be him, second-guess him, or tell him what to do.”<sup>167</sup> Nonetheless, the Beowulf we encounter at the end of the poem is not a hero whose behaviour can simply be emulated—he is a king whose main purpose should be the protection of his kingdom. Whilst Beowulf is not a second Heremod, he also doesn’t quite heed Hrothgar’s main lesson here, namely that a king needs to learn from the past, and prepare for the future, and utilise his strengths accordingly. The example set by Heremod shows that circumstances surrounding a man’s birth may be fortuitous, but he should still actively seek knowledge and forge relationships with his people. That Beowulf has not done this is suggested by the fact that we do not hear of any of his counsellors. Indeed, the poet does not specify the names of any of his companions, with the exception of Wiglaf.<sup>168</sup> The loneliness ascribed to Heremod here by Hrothgar resonates with Beowulf’s kingship and the apparent absence of close and loyal relationships. Yet the comparison between Heremod and Beowulf should not be pushed too far. As was the case with Sigemund, the poet creates links with Beowulf, but he does not present Beowulf as a new Heremod. While they are both at the end of their dynastic line, Beowulf is still considered to be a good king. Instead, the effect of these comparisons is an added complexity to Beowulf’s character and motivations. Due to this complexity he evades direct identification with other characters. Thus, Beowulf refuses to become like Heremod or Hrothgar, depressed or despairing: “Beowulf will not convert to a moral world of self-doubt, but rather supplants feeling with action.”<sup>169</sup> In this, again, he stays true to his heroic past.

#### 1.5.4. Hrothgar’s Sermon: Pride and Relationships

After Hrothgar has set Beowulf the example of Heremod, his speech moves into a religious mode. He marvels at the power of ‘mihtig God’ (l. 1728), and specifically at his beneficence: he has given mankind ‘snyttru’ (l. 1729; wisdom), and ‘eard 7 eorlscipe’ (l. 1730a; dwelling place and lordship). What started specifically with God’s gifts to

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<sup>167</sup> Sarah L. Higley, “Thought in *Beowulf* and Our Perception of It: Interiority, Power, and the Problem of the Revealed Mind”, in *The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval Heroism in Honor of George Clark*, ed. Robin Waugh and James Weldon (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), 38.

<sup>168</sup> As Biggs has also pointed out. See Biggs, “*Beowulf* and some fictions”, 77.

<sup>169</sup> Higley, “Thought in *Beowulf*”, 38.

mankind, becomes more specific with the word ‘eorlscipe.’<sup>170</sup> Hrothgar is not talking about humanity in general, but about those who carry authority.<sup>171</sup> The sermon as a whole has as its purpose, according to Shippey, to warn Beowulf of change, implicit in the sword Beowulf gave to Hrothgar, which preceded this sermon and demonstrates a shift of power.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, foresight is a sign of true wisdom, and this is what Hrothgar warns Beowulf against: not arrogance or pride, but ignorance and ‘lack of experience.’<sup>173</sup> This ties in with the general focus on knowledge that Hrothgar displays throughout the poem and which I have discussed above. While I mostly agree with Shippey, there is also another aspect to Hrothgar’s sermon, namely once again the relationship between a lord and his retainers. In this case, however, the lord himself becomes a retainer and God is his lord. God as a lord displays (unsurprisingly) the very best elements of good leadership. For instance, he is portrayed as generous:

Hwilum he on lufan    læteð hworfan  
monnes modgeþonc    mæran cynnes,  
seleð him on eþle    eorþan wynne,  
to healdanne    hleoburh weras,  
gedeð him swa gewealdene    worolde dælas,  
side rice,    þæt he his selfa ne mæg  
for his unsnyttrum    ende geþencean. (ll. 1728–1734)

Sometimes for love he allows to turn  
the mind of a man of a great people,  
gives him in his home earth’s delight  
to rule a stronghold of men,  
makes for him thus to control parts of the world,  
wide kingdoms, so that he himself cannot  
for his lack of wisdom imagine its end.

<sup>170</sup> The Dictionary of Old English gives the first meaning of ‘eorlscipe’ as ‘nobility, lordly power, lordship; manliness.’ <https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/>, accessed 7/12/2020.

<sup>171</sup> Hrothgar is, as the other characters in the poem, officially a pagan. For more on the role of paganism and Christianity in the poem see, for instance, Benson, “The Pagan Colouring of *Beowulf*”, 35–50.

<sup>172</sup> Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 41.

<sup>173</sup> Shippey, *Old English Verse*, 42.

God does not just give wisdom, but also grants leadership to those who deserve it. The depiction of God as the highest king is not new, and *Beowulf* is certainly not the only Old English text which portrays him as a monarch. The poem *Daniel*, for instance, calls God “Great King, Shepherd of souls”<sup>174</sup> What this tells us is that the relationship between a secular lord and his retainers is mirrored in the relationship between God and a king on earth. The lord, then, takes on the role of the retainer who needs to show loyalty, for which he is rewarded through God’s generosity.

Hrothgar continues, however, to tell Beowulf how this relationship can become skewed.

Pinceð him to lytel    þæt he to lange heold,  
 gytsað gromhydig,    nallas on gylp seleð  
 fædde beagas,    ond he þa forðgesceaft  
 forgyteð ond forgymeð,    þæs þe him ær God sealde,  
 wuldres waldend,    weorðmynda dæl. (ll. 1748–1752).

It seems to him too little what he has held for too long;  
 He is avaricious, angry-minded, not at all in pride will give  
 decorated rings, and he that destiny  
 forgets and neglects that which God had given him before,  
 Ruler of glory, a share of honour.

It is here that Shippey’s argument that Hrothgar does not warn Beowulf against pride falls short. Indeed, Hrothgar even appeals to Beowulf directly and says ‘oferhyda ne gym’ (l.1760; do not heed pride). This pride, however, comes from a lack of understanding,<sup>175</sup> and a complacency that neglects the fact that circumstances change, as Hrothgar makes clear:

<sup>174</sup> *Daniel*, trans. Charles W. Kennedy (Cambridge, Ontario: In parentheses Publications Old English Series, 2000), 5.

<sup>175</sup> As Kaske has noted, pride is what turns men away from wisdom, and thus skews a person’s understanding of the world around him and his duties in it. Kaske, “Sapientia et Fortitudo”, 432.



Nu is þines mægnes blæd  
 ane hwile; eft sona bið  
 þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfeð (ll. 1761b–1763).

Now is the fame of your might  
 for a little while. Soon it once more will be  
 that sickness or the sword will hinder strength

What Hrothgar warns against, then, is a secular ruler's inattention to the relationship with his own lord, God. He forgets what he has been given, the generosity he has been shown, and instead he becomes greedy. The resulting pride also affects the king's relationship with his own followers, as he fails to show generosity to them. Thus, while lack of foresight is certainly an issue here, as is pride, I suggest that what lies at the heart of these issues is, according to Hrothgar at least, an imbalance in the relationship between king and God, which then results in a bad relationship between king and retainers. The example of Heremod, discussed above, reinforces this interpretation.

#### 1.5.5. Putting the Lessons into Practice: Beowulf as King

While Beowulf the hero may have seemed faultless, despite potentially monstrous elements,<sup>176</sup> as a king he is fundamentally human, and imperfect. The events in Beowulf's life before he becomes king, and indeed the first fifty years of his reign, are relatively undocumented. Nonetheless, "Beowulf describes Hygelac's disastrous raid on the Franks

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<sup>176</sup> Cautioning against Robinson's arguments that Beowulf does not possess monstrous characteristics, Stanley Greenfield suggests that "there may be, after all, a touch of the monstrous in the hero, and that such a touch is not alien to the nature of the Germanic epic hero" (67–68). Based on a discussion of Beowulf's three "aquatic episodes" Greenfield concludes that a "touch of the monstrous" is likely in the hero (73). Stanley B. Greenfield, "A Touch of the Monstrous in the Hero or Beowulf Re-Marvellized", in *Hero and Exile: The Art of Old English Poetry*, ed. George H. Brown (London: The Hambledon Press, 1989), 67–73. Such an interpretation would then link Beowulf more closely to his uncle Hygelac, who is mentioned in the *Liber Monstrorum de Diversus Generibus*: "And there are monsters of amazing size, like King Hygelac, who ruled the Geats..." (Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 134). As Timothy J. Burbery has pointed out, the author has a broad definition of monstrous. Timothy J. Burbery, "Fossil Folklore in the *Liber Monstrorum*, *Beowulf*, and Medieval Scholarship", *Folklore* 126.3 (02 September 2015): 318. As a result, these features are probably best described as 'superhuman' ones, which serve a hero but clearly do not necessarily serve a king.

—four times,”<sup>177</sup> demonstrating the impact of Hygelac’s fateful decision on his family and kingdom. Beowulf’s dedication and loyalty to his uncle is obvious, as he passes on the treasure from Hrothgar to Hygelac.<sup>178</sup> Beowulf’s reluctance to become king should be noted here too; when Hygd offers him the throne he declines, instead assisting her son Heardred when he succeeds his father, Hygelac.<sup>179</sup> Heardred, though, does not rule for long, and the poet summarises Beowulf’s first fifty years as king very briefly:

He geheold tela  
 fiftig wintra — wæs ða frod cyning,  
 eald eþelweard, — oð ðæt an ongan  
 deorcum nihtum draca ricsian,  
 se ðe on heaum hofe hord beweotode,  
 stanbeorh stearcne. (ll. 2208b–2213a).

He held it well  
 for fifty winters, was a wise king then,  
 an old guardian of the realm, until continuously began  
 on dark nights a dragon to hold sway,  
 who in the battle-mound watched over treasure,  
 a stark stone-barrow.

There is an interesting parallel with Hrothgar here, revealed by the poet’s choice of words. Porck has argued that Beowulf, like Hrothgar, is portrayed as a wise king and that “the main difference between the two kings is the manner in which they respond to the monstrous incursions against their people.”<sup>180</sup> It is true that Beowulf is often called wise,<sup>181</sup> but the passage above marks a crucial change that suggests he, unlike Hrothgar, abandons his gained wisdom when the monster enters the scene. So far, no possible conclusions seem to have been drawn from the words ‘ða’ and ‘oð ðæt’ in this context,

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<sup>177</sup> Alaric Hall, “Hygelac’s only daughter: a present, a potentate and a peaceweaver in *Beowulf*”, *Studia Neophilologica* 78 (2006): 83.

<sup>178</sup> ll. 2148–2150.

<sup>179</sup> ll. 2370–2373.

<sup>180</sup> Porck, *Old Age*, 198.

<sup>181</sup> For instance in l. 2800a and 2329a.

which is surprising considering the information they could give us about Beowulf's kingship. Crucially, just as Hrothgar was a good king until he grew old, it is possible to read these lines to mean that Beowulf was wise *then*, and *until* the dragon arrived. In this interpretation, the fight against the dragon provokes something in Beowulf which leads him to ignore the lessons taught to him by Hrothgar. Indeed, it appears he neglects his first and foremost duty as king, namely to protect his people. As Orchard has noted: "Beowulf's gloriously successful past, the poet makes clear, is no guarantee of the future."<sup>182</sup>

The arrival of the dragon separates Beowulf the king from Beowulf the hero. The dragon, angry over a stolen cup, destroys the homes of the Geats, but Beowulf only springs into action once he learns his own hall has been destroyed:

Pa wæs Biowulfe broga gecyðed  
 snude to soðe, þæt his sylfes ham,  
 bolda selest, brynewylmum mealt,  
 gifstol Geata. Þæt ðam godan wæs  
 hreow on hreðre, hygesorga mæst. (ll. 2324–2328)

Then was to Beowulf the danger announced,  
 Immediately as a fact, that his own home,  
 the best of dwellings, was melting in surging flames,  
 the gift-seat of the Geats. That to the good man was  
 grief in his heart, the greatest soul-sorrow.

The poet suggests that the burning down of his own hall is more painful to Beowulf than the suffering of his people. Indeed, several of his decisions in his preparations for fighting the dragon appear to be out of character with the Beowulf we encounter earlier on in the poem. The dragon is the third monster Beowulf encounters, but it is the first one he faces as king. This is the moment the poet alluded to in the passage above, the watershed moment which separates Beowulf the king from Beowulf the hero: it is as a hero once more that Beowulf prepares for his confrontation with the dragon. There are many instances in the poem that demonstrate how his heroic spirit is reawakened. Those

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<sup>182</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 256.

discussed here are merely a selection, but help to provide a clearer picture of how Beowulf, about to face a monster once more, returns to his heroic past.

First of all, Beowulf only takes a very small band of men with him to face the dragon. Surely this is a strange decision, especially considering the great threat posed by the dragon. After all, it has already burned much of the land and killed many people. The poet makes Beowulf's reasoning quite clear:

Oferhogode ða hringa fengel  
 þæt he þone widflogan weorode gesohte,  
 sidan herge; no he him þam sæcce ondred,  
 ne him þæs wyrmes wig for wiht dyde,  
 eafoð ond ellen, forðon he ær fela  
 nearo neðende niða gedigde,  
 hildehlemma, syððan he Hroðgares,  
 sigoreadig secg, sele fælsode,  
 ond æt guðe forgrap Grendeles mægum,  
 laðan cynnes. (ll. 2345–2354a)

He then scorned, the prince of rings  
 that he that wide-flier would seek with his troop  
 with his great army. Not at all did he himself fear that battle,  
 nor did he in any way set store by the dragon's fighting ability,  
 strength and courage, because before he braved many  
 a difficulty endured hostility,  
 crashes of battle, since he Hrothgar's  
 victory-blessed warrior, cleansed the hall,  
 and at the encounter destroyed Grendel's blood-relative,  
 of a loathsome race.

This passage is important for two reasons. Firstly, it explains why Beowulf does not bring more than eleven men with him: the poet simply attributes the decision to pride —the very sin Hrothgar had warned him against. Secondly, it shows that the source of this present pride lies in the past, in the time when he was still a hero. When he travelled to Denmark all those years ago, Beowulf also brought a small number of men with him.

Even though the Danish expedition consisted of fourteen men, a couple more than he brings to face the dragon, it was still a very small army. Thus, besides the fact that his pride made him trust his strength so much that he felt capable of dealing with the dragon by himself, the expedition may also have reminded him of the last monsters he fought, and made him prepare for this fight in a similar fashion. As Swanton has stated: “in old age, Beowulf finally falls into the ultimate kingly sin, that of oferhygd...”<sup>183</sup> Beowulf, then, on the last day of his life, does give way to pride. Hrothgar, having foresight, realised that his strength would fade as he grew older, but Beowulf does not share this ability to look ahead. He still believes firmly in his own strength. After all, his pride, courage, and strength served him well in the old days.

Beowulf’s speech to his men, occurring just before he goes to meet the dragon, provides another indication that he returns, mentally, to his heroic younger years. After he has recounted some of his other feats as a hero, we read that “Beowulf maðelode, beotwordum spræc, niehstan siðe” (ll. 2510–2511; Beowulf spoke, said boasting words, for the last time). In this boast, he again returns to the fight with Grendel:

“Nolde ic sweord beran,  
wæpen to wyrme,    gif ic wiste hu  
wið ðam aglæcean    elles meahte  
gylpe wiðgripan,    swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde (ll. 2518b–2521).

I would not carry a sword  
a weapon against the dragon, if I knew how  
against that opponent I could otherwise  
grapple by my boast, just as I formerly did with Grendel.

These lines almost read like a defense of his decision to carry a sword. Beowulf’s specific mention of Grendel reinforces the idea that he is indeed making a connection with his heroic past. The next part of his speech is even more insightful in this respect:

Gebide ge on beorge    byrnum werede,

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<sup>183</sup> M.J. Swanton, *Crisis and Development in Germanic Society 700–800: Beowulf and the Burden of Kingship* (Göppingen: Kümmerle Verlag, 1982), 140.

secgas on searwum, hwæðer sel mæge  
 æfter wælræse wunde gedygan  
 uncer twega. Nis þæt eower sið,  
 ne gemet mannes, nefne min anes,  
 þæt he wið aglæcean efoðo dæle,  
 eorlscype efne. (ll. (2529–2535a)

Wait on the barrow protected by coats of mail,  
 warriors in armour, whichever may better  
 after deadly conflict survive a wound  
 of the two of us. It is not your journey,  
 Nor the measure of any man, except mine alone.”  
 He knew with what opponent he would share might,  
 perform lordship.

Why does he ask his men to stay behind, and why does he go to face the dragon on his own? Again, the connection with his heroic past is very much present here. When Beowulf was in Denmark, he had brought his small group of retainers with him, but nevertheless he was the one who fought Grendel, on his own. The fight against Grendel’s mother provides an additional similarity. Not only did he face both the dragon and Grendel’s mother on his own, he also had to fight the monsters on their own territory: Grendel’s mother in the mere and the dragon in the barrow. Another point of interest is Beowulf’s insistence that this fight is not theirs, i.e. his retainers.’ This is an interesting remark, as the dragon is destroying the country, burning the homes of the people in the land. Additionally, the relationship between a king and his retainers should be such that they can rely on each other in times of danger. Why are they excluded from facing the monster that is also terrorising them? Again, it is Beowulf the hero who is speaking here rather than Beowulf the king. He considers this fight to be a personal one, an opportunity to show his courage, and thus to win the two things a hero always searches for: glory and treasure. Yet he seems to have forgotten that glory and treasure should not be his priorities anymore. As king his priorities should be the protection and well-being of his people. This idea is reinforced by what Beowulf stated earlier on in the poem: “gyt ic wylle,/ frod folces weard fæhðe secan” (ll. 2512b–2513; still I will, wise guardian of the people seek out a feud...). Ogilvy and Baker have seen in this the confirmation that Beowulf is “not

on a mere treasure hunt; he is defending his subjects.”<sup>184</sup> On the contrary, at the very best this sentence shows that Beowulf’s intentions may be good, but his idea of the duties of a good king seems to be misguided. He appears to believe that the winning of glory (which is personal glory, for he intends to face the dragon alone) means that he is being a good king, who is guarding his people. The end of the poem, however, shows that he was wrong. At his death, he has gained his glory, has won the treasure, but his people will suffer. The woman who laments at Beowulf’s funeral pyre envisages a very dark future for the Geats. Hence, Ogilvy and Baker’s insistence on a Beowulf who even now behaves like a king should be dubious in the face of so many indications to the contrary, as will be shown again in the next passage.

The behaviour of Beowulf’s retainers during the fight with the dragon has been alluded to before. The poet tells us that:

Nealles him on heape handgesteallan,  
 æðelinga bearn ymbe gestodon  
 hildecystum, ac hy on holt bugon,  
 ealdre burgan. (ll. 2596–2599a).

Not at all in a troop did his hand-picked associates,  
 the offspring of heroes, stand near him  
 with valour, for they fled into the wood,  
 to protect life.

This is a disgraceful thing to do, as Wiglaf (the only one who does stand by his king) tells them afterwards. However, Beowulf himself told his men that this was his own fight, and specifically stated that he would, personally, defeat the dragon or die. Moreover, as Swanton has noted, “Accustomed to have Beowulf take the kingdom’s problems on his own shoulders so entirely, and so brusquely, it is hardly surprising that when the hero now proves hard pressed, his retinue shrink back.”<sup>185</sup> His retinue, then, may have behaved in a cowardly manner, but perhaps this is at least in part Beowulf’s own fault. His men

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<sup>184</sup> J.D.C. Ogilvy and Donald C. Baker, *Reading Beowulf: an introduction to the poem, its background, and its style* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 79.

<sup>185</sup> Swanton, *Crisis and Development*, 141.

had been told to stay away, and therefore it could be said that they are simply obeying orders. Perhaps more importantly, they have never been able to be heroes themselves, for Beowulf had always solved everything on his own. That his men, who as far as we know thus far had never been called upon to be heroic, do not show heroic behaviour now is therefore perhaps not very surprising.

Beowulf's final speech sheds more light on his conceptions of kingship, and the lack of consideration he has for continuity. The speech is directed to Wiglaf, the only one who has returned to help his lord. Beowulf begins his speech by mentioning the succession to the throne of the Geats (which will be discussed later on), and then discusses why he considers himself to have been a good king. As a good king who knows his end is nigh, however, we would perhaps expect Beowulf to give instructions to Wiglaf as to what he should do after his lord's death, to give him some advice. With his dying breath, however, Beowulf does no such thing. Beowulf asks Wiglaf to show him the treasure "þæt ic ðy seft mæge / æfter maððumwelan min alætan/ lif ond leodscipe, þone ic longe heold" (ll. 2749b–2751; so that I may gently, because of the wealth of treasure, leave my life and nation, which I long held). When Beowulf sees the treasure, he gives thanks to God "þæs ðe ic moste minum leodum/ ær swyltdæge swylc gestrynan" (ll. 2797–2798; because I may for my people before my death-day acquire such (treasure)). Admittedly this seems to be a very unselfish thing to say, and it is reinforced by the poet's own assertion that "Næs he goldhwæte" (l. 3074a; he was not eager for gold). Contrary to his wishes, the gold is not given to the people but is reburied. Once more, then, his intentions may have been good but, in this instance, we see how Beowulf again misunderstands or misinterprets his role as a king. The people have no need of gold, or at least, what they need first and foremost is someone to protect them. Baker and Ogilvy are right in claiming that "Beowulf's tactics may be open to criticism, but it is hard to see how he could have saved his people without fighting the dragon..."<sup>186</sup> It is not the fighting of the dragon, however, that is problematic. It is the fact that Beowulf refuses help until it is too late, and that he had not prepared for his death: the downfall of the Geats is not to be blamed on the death of Beowulf, but on the fact that before he died he did not think about what would happen afterwards, as a good and wise king should have done.<sup>187</sup> In other words,

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<sup>186</sup> Ogilvy and Baker, *Reading Beowulf*, 79.

<sup>187</sup> As Biggs has noted, Beowulf has no one specific to pass the treasure on to: "Not only, then, does the thief associate Beowulf with the crime that leads to the destruction of his



he did not give thought to continuity. As we have seen, he did not give instructions to Wiglaf, and his retainers were clearly not used to dangerous fights. Most important in this respect is that he did not consider the matter of his own succession.

The problem of the succession arises from the fact that Beowulf did not marry (as far as we know) and did not have children. At the end of his life, this is something he regrets:

“Nu ic suna minum    syllan wolde  
 guðgewædu,    þær me gifeðe swa  
 ænig yrfeweard    æfter wurde  
 lice gelenge. (ll. 2729–2732a)  
 Now I would want to pass on to my own son  
 the war-gear, if to me it so had been granted  
 any heir had come after  
 belonging to my line.

It seems that, up to this point, Beowulf has not given much thought to his succession. This is a curious matter to disregard, considering the important role given to a king's offspring in the rest of the poem, as Gale Owen-Crocker has noted:

...Beowulf has no heir, a perplexing complication in the poem. Is it Beowulf's failing? Because Scyld is honoured for fathering Beow, a 'comfort to his people' (folce to frofre, l. 14a) and Fremu for bearing Eomer, a 'help to warriors' (haeleðum to hepe, l. 1961a), it seems natural that conceiving a son was a king's duty.<sup>188</sup>

Owen-Crocker also comments on the importance of having an heir:

Royal succession was taken for granted with Scyld, Beow and Healfdane, but when a king is not survived by a son (or a brother or a nephew) it may mean the

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kingdom, the theft, with its suggestions of a sexual failing, points to a specific cause for this disaster.” Biggs, “*Beowulf* and some fictions”, 69.

<sup>188</sup> Gwara, *Heroic Identity*, 292.

end of a dynasty. Beowulf's most loyal kinsman, and heir to his jewellery and armour is, it seems, related on the paternal side, not the royal, maternal side.<sup>189</sup>

In other words, the succession would not have been such a great problem if Beowulf had had other close (male) relatives. But as he does not have these potential successors, Wiglaf, as apparently the only relative left, would be a logical candidate. Yet it seems strange that a king like Beowulf, who by all accounts was a good king for at least fifty years, should not have considered who would succeed him after his death. This disregard for his succession is, in my view, another example of a Beowulf who is uncomfortable with his role as king, with the importance of looking ahead, and more at ease with being a hero, only concerned with the present. As a hero, he would not have had to think about marriage and children: a hero's glory is a personal one. This glory, obtained by performing heroic deeds during life, will lead to fame after death. As this is the aim of the hero having an heir is of no importance at all. For a king, however, who needs to consider his kingdom's future security and stability, providing an heir is crucial.

To conclude, Beowulf's kingship demonstrates what happens when heroic qualities and royal duties clash. That they do not have to clash is shown by Hrothgar, who repurposes heroic qualities to fit into the expectations of kingship. Ogilvy and Baker, however, have stated that Beowulf was a "hero-king," or in other words, that he was a king who behaved heroically.<sup>190</sup> But whereas they see this as a positive characteristic, I have argued that this is exactly where the problem lies. Some of the most important characteristics of a great hero and a good king are, the poet suggests, incompatible. A great hero who fights for glory and treasure does not have the same priorities as a good king who fights for the benefit of his people. Beowulf's 'faults,' then, were not the faults he had as a person, as an individual, but very specifically faults he had as an old king. The role of king suits him for as long as there is no reminder of his years as a hero. The dragon awakens the old hero in him: once more he is hungry for personal glory and treasure. This explains why he only brings a small group of retainers, why he then decided to fight the dragon alone, and why the only thing he wants before he dies is to see the treasure he has won. The problem of the succession also originates from the same idea: a hero does not need an heir. Many scholars, including Ogilvy and Baker, dismiss the

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<sup>189</sup> Owen-Crocker, *The Four Funerals*, 224.

<sup>190</sup> Ogilvy and Baker, *Reading Beowulf*, 73.

criticism of Beowulf's behaviour, claiming that he was a great hero. I believe they are right; he was a great hero. But it appears that they do not distinguish between the two roles played by Beowulf. He makes his mistakes as a king. The characteristics that make a hero great — strength, courage, pride — do not necessarily clash with the requirements of kingship, but they should be applied in a different way and with a different aim. For instance, courage is important for both a hero and a king, but while a hero can use it to find personal glory, a king should direct it towards protecting his kingdom. Thus, at the end of his life, when the events remind him of his heroic feats all those years ago, Beowulf forgets the lessons Hrothgar tried to teach him, and he attempts to become the great hero once more.

Thijs Porck has argued, however, that when it comes to a comparison of old kings, it is in fact Hrothgar who is presented as a negative example. He comments that criticism of Beowulf's kingship, such as the decision to face the dragon on his own, is "ill-founded."<sup>191</sup> He adds that, while pride does play a part, Beowulf sacrifices himself for his people, and "by facing the dragon alone, Beowulf also ensures that none of his retainers will perish on his behalf."<sup>192</sup> Based on the discussion above, I am not convinced by this argument. The poem offers the possibility that Beowulf was wise *until* the dragon arrived, and Beowulf's self-sacrifice becomes a sacrifice of his people due to the lack of a clear and strong succession. Moreover, his retainers would not necessarily perish on behalf of their king; this is an interpretation that suits a hero's companions, as then they would die for their hero's own personal glory. However, Beowulf's retainers here would not merely fight the dragon for their lord, but for the safety of their kingdom. Their service and cooperation are, as discussed, significant elements in the relationship between a lord and his men. Rather, I have argued that it is Beowulf's unaltered heroism which shows us his faults as a king. His lack of wisdom at the end of his reign, which entails appreciation for the importance of learning from the past and thinking about the future, lessons he had the opportunity to learn, leads to heroic pride. Perhaps the underlying message is that for Beowulf his life as a great hero got in the way of being an ideal king.

Nonetheless, in the end the poet is not interested in ideal kings, but in human ones. Beowulf, like Scyld and Hrothgar, is not called a perfect king, but a good king. All of these kings were limited by their circumstances and their abilities. What sets them apart

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<sup>191</sup> Porck, *Old Age*, 207.

<sup>192</sup> Porck, *Old Age*, 207.

from characters such as Heremod, however, is that their heroic deeds while young were remembered and ensured their people's support even when, in the case of Hrothgar and Beowulf, old age failed them: "In the case of an old man, hardly fit for battle himself, his heroism rests on two elements: the reputation as a fighter which he won for himself in his younger days, and the ability to inspire love and loyalty among followers who will defend his cause."<sup>193</sup> Thus, the three good kings are all linked in several ways, yet each is defined by his own circumstances and his reactions to them. The similarities between Scyld and Beowulf highlight the circularity of the poem, as Orchard has noted: "like Scyld Scefing, Beowulf himself will come unannounced across the sea as a 'shield' or protection to aid the Danes in their 'dire distress.'" He also mentions that they depart in the same way: with much treasure, and never seen again in Denmark.<sup>194</sup>

## 1.6. Conclusion

Kingship in *Beowulf* is in many ways reminiscent of the descriptions of former glory presented in *The Ruin*. This poem, an elegy, occurs together with the *Seafarer*, *The Wanderer*, and *Widsith*, in the tenth-century Exeter Book. *The Ruin* is concerned with the past, and how once awe-inspiring buildings have now crumbled and decayed, a fact lamented by the narrator. The first line makes the link to *Beowulf* clear: "Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon" (l.1; wondrous is this wallstone, broken by the course of events). 'Wyrd' takes centre stage in this poem. Treharne states that, rather than providing consolation, *The Ruin* mainly offers "a sense of appreciation for the achievements of past generations, and the startling contrast between the previous splendour and present deterioration of the buildings."<sup>195</sup> It is perhaps not difficult to see how this description could apply to *Beowulf* too: everything begins and ends with 'wyrd' (often translated as fate but, as we have seen, perhaps better interpreted as a change in events or circumstances), and indeed the poem literally begins and ends with this word, as it occurs

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<sup>193</sup> Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism", 27.

<sup>194</sup> Orchard, *A Critical Companion*, 103.

<sup>195</sup> Elaine Treharne, ed., *Old and Middle English: an Anthology, c. 890–1400* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 84.

in the first and last line.<sup>196</sup> Changing circumstances thus enclose the lives of *Beowulf's* characters, determining everything within it. Like the kings and their dynasties in *Beowulf*, kingdoms in *The Ruin* inevitably perish:

Oft þæs wag gebad  
ræghar ond readfah,    rice æfter oðrum  
ofstonden under stormum,    steap geap gedreas. (ll. 9b–11).

Often this wall remained,  
grey with lichen and red-stained, one kingdom after another  
endured standing under storms, lofty and curved it collapsed.

Effectively, what the poet describes here is the end of a dynasty, and one can well imagine this to be the situation at the end of *Beowulf*, when Beowulf himself has died.

While Treharne is right to highlight the contrast *The Ruin* offers, in the light of *Beowulf* it acquires a more acute sense of longing too, dependent on the realisation that past glories can disappear forever—even though we may still notice its remnants. It is this ability, to look both backwards and forwards in time, to learn from the past in order to attempt to create some kind of continuity, which makes a wise king of Hrothgar and an unwise one of Beowulf. Hrothgar is the only king in the poem who shows an understanding of the fact that good kingship does not merely rely on specific qualities, but on the wise and effective application of these qualities when the circumstances demand it. The *Beowulf* poet at no time presents these ‘good’ kings as perfect kings. Indeed, throughout the poem he emphasises their humanity: while powerful, they too have their limitations.

What matters ultimately is how a king relates to those around him, how he fosters and maintains the relationships that will provide him with the loyalty and support to protect his kingdom. As Anne Klinck has noted: “in the close-knit tribal society depicted by Old-English poetry, separation from the person or persons to whom one belongs deprives not only of companionship but of one’s entire function in the world. One’s lord,

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<sup>196</sup> Although it should be noted that some of the poem is lost, due to the manuscript being damaged. Theoretically, then, the word could have occurred elsewhere in the poem too. Nonetheless, considering the tone and descriptions in the middle part, I think this is unlikely.

whether liege-lord or husband, and friends, that is ‘loved ones,’ ‘kin,’ provide an enveloping security.”<sup>197</sup> The exile that we encounter in *Beowulf* is not exactly the same as that in the other poems discussed in this chapter. For instance, none of the major characters experience exile in the way that we see in poems like *Deor*, or the *Wanderer*. Exile in *Beowulf* is more related to the mind, to the actions of those who, like Heremod, turn on their own society, on the people they should have forged strong relationships with and who, as a result, end up as exiles not of physical place but of their position in society. The good kings in *Beowulf* all do consider their positions in society, their relationships with their men, and the stability of the kingdom. Crucially, as I have discussed, the exact nature of good kingship depends on the needs of the kingdom and the stage the dynasty finds itself in. Scyld is depicted as the ultimate warrior-king, which he needs to be as the first of his dynasty, and having to prove himself to attract followers. He provides stability through his son Beow. Hrothgar’s kingship shows that he is wise, and that he appreciates the importance of mutual dependency between himself and his men. Importantly, his wisdom allows him to take on the role of teacher to Beowulf. Through him the poet also shows that even good kings cannot control everything; ‘wyrd’ always has a role to play. Beowulf’s kingship is the most complex one. His good rule effectively ends with the arrival of the dragon, which leads him to abandon the lessons taught by Hrothgar, and return to his heroic youth. It is here that we can clearly see the main argument of this chapter in practice. Like heroes, kings need courage. Unlike heroes, this courage for a king needs to be directed not to glory for himself, but towards the protection of his kingdom. By reverting back to being a hero, and not providing continuity by having a (son and) heir, Beowulf’s legacy is tainted by the likely end of the Geatish people.

*The Ruin* shows us that there are always remnants of the past around us, allowing the living to reconstruct them in their imaginations. In *Beowulf* too, events and changes in circumstances are always waiting, regardless of good kings and their decisions, as we have seen. As Dorothy Whitelock has stated, “The poet seems determined not to let us forget how temporary are the effects even of good actions in this world.”<sup>198</sup> And yet, at the same time, while *The Ruin* also demonstrates how transitory human achievements are, its very subject matter highlights that the past is never that far away, that fragments can

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<sup>197</sup> Anne Lingard Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 225

<sup>198</sup> Whitelock, *the Audience of Beowulf*, 98.

and do survive. The ruins cannot tell us about the past with complete accuracy, but they give us hints and allow us to reimagine and reconstruct in our minds. This is exactly what the *Beowulf* poet does too. In the end, he reconstructs a past for his audience in which royal authority (while displaying universal characteristics such as courage, protection, and reciprocity with subjects) also needs to recognise its limitations. Royal authority, the poet suggests, is about being able to adapt. It is this vision of royal power that is used by Alfred and his scholars and is, fittingly, adapted to ninth-century circumstances.

## Chapter 2: The Alfredian Group

### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter explores notions of kingship by examining the Alfredian Group and associated texts. I will argue that the texts under consideration here together show how Alfred's reign marked a turning point, a moment in which existing ideas about kingship were adapted into a new framework of royal authority. I will suggest that, specifically, this new image presents the king not just in his traditional, secular, role of protector, but extends this to include religious and scholarly elements. The Alfredian group builds on several traditions and constructs, according to the needs of the times and circumstances, to create a new vision of kingship based on the past, but with concern for the future. Thus, traditional secular ideas about kingship, such as the importance of the relationship between a king and his people, founded on generosity from the king and loyalty and obedience from his subjects, and a concern with justice, are combined with the influence of Charlemagne (the king as a learned man), and the biblical kings Solomon and David. Davidic elements in particular are significant, as they allow Alfred to assume religious authority. Crucially, however, Alfredian texts do not merely incorporate these elements into this new vision of royal authority, they are transformed: Charlemagne's model of learned kingship, based on King Solomon, for instance, is adapted into a model that is not just concerned with acquiring knowledge, but also with dispensing it, allowing the king to assume not only secular but also religious authority, as he becomes a teacher and pastoral carer. The texts in the Alfredian Group, then, ultimately become instruments for transmitting and reinforcing the king's power over his people.

Alfred the Great's (r. 871–899) epithet suggests a king who fulfilled the expectations of the royal office—at least in the eyes of those sixteenth-century writers who first used it.<sup>199</sup> Alfred faced many challenges during his reign. In the end, he remained as the only English<sup>200</sup> king who had successfully defended Wessex against the

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<sup>199</sup> Barbara Yorke, "Alfred the Great: The Most Perfect Man in History?" *History Today* 49.10 (November 1999), <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/alfred-great-most-perfect-man-history>. Yorke argues that Alfred's sixteenth-century attention results from the Reformation. The fact that he had not been canonised and had taken an interest in learning made him "an ideal figurehead for the emerging English Protestant church."

<sup>200</sup> The meaning of 'Anglo-Saxon' has been discussed by Susan Reynolds. In the same article she also discusses the use of 'English,' and states that this term, rather than 'Anglo-



Vikings (albeit with varying success at the start), had commenced a programme of educational reform, resulting in what has been termed the ‘Alfredian Renaissance,’ and was the first to be called ‘king of the Anglo-Saxons,’ rather than ‘king of the West Saxons.’<sup>201</sup> Patrick Wormald noted that even though Alfred may have seen and promoted himself as king of the English, there is no evidence that people in other parts of the country identified as such. However, Wormald does concede that ““it was born as an idea.”<sup>202</sup> This idea of Englishness, borne out of a shared identity, is an important theme in ninth-century English literature. Crucially, it is also strongly linked to a vision of kingship that is promoted in these texts. Thus, labouring under difficult circumstances, Alfred’s reign saw the rise of new political ideas about identity and, inseparably, kingship.

So far I have used the terms ‘Alfredian’ and ‘Alfred’ in a seemingly indiscriminate manner, and they require some elucidation. According to Janet Nelson, the term ‘Alfredian’ is currently in use in two ways: firstly, to denote those works that emanated from Alfred’s court, created under his patronage. Secondly, to refer to those works written by Alfred himself, with or without help from his scholars.<sup>203</sup> Nelson includes the Chronicle, Old English *Orosius*, and the *Vita Alfredi* in the first category. In this chapter, I will use the term Alfredian in a way that combines Nelson’s division: the ideas and texts described as ‘Alfredian’ in this chapter are those that arose from the educational reform instigated during Alfred’s reign, which Alfred himself may (or may not) have contributed to personally. Thus, the term as employed here does not indicate Alfred’s own role as author or translator, but points to the renewed atmosphere of learning cultivated at his court in general.

I refer to the collection of Alfredian writing as the Alfredian group. While often referred to as the ‘Canon,’ this term implies a conscious and deliberate movement behind the translations, steered by an executive body. This is at odds with the many uncertainties

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Saxon,’ was the preferred term for self-identification until at least the tenth century (414). Susan Reynolds, “What Do We Mean by “Anglo-Saxon” and “Anglo-Saxons”?” *Journal of British Studies* 24 (October 1985): 395–414. The term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ has recently created controversy. See, for instance, Susan Oosthuizen on the issues surrounding the terminology. Susan Oosthuizen, *The Emergence of the English* (Leeds, Arc Humanities Press, 2019), 3–6.

<sup>201</sup> Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: Longman, 1998), 9.

<sup>202</sup> Wormald, “The Making of England,” *History Today* 45.2. (1995): 32.

<sup>203</sup> Janet Nelson, “The Political Ideas of King Alfred the Great,” in *Kings and kingship in medieval Europe*, ed. Anne J. Duggan (London: King’s College London Mediaeval Studies, 1993), 137.

surrounding Alfred's own potential involvement, and the idea that these texts arose from a renewed interest in learning which started at the royal court. Regarding the use of Alfred's own name in the discussion of royal voice in the texts, this depends largely on the specific text and the current consensus on what exactly Alfred's role could have been. The royal voice in the Old English *Boethius*, for instance, has been the subject of much debate which has not reached a convincing conclusion, and thus needs to be treated with more care than, say, Alfred's involvement in the *Psalms*, which Patrick O'Neill has convincingly argued to show Alfred's personal touch.<sup>204</sup> This differentiation in the use of the terms Alfred and Alfredian, however, does not just exist between texts but also within texts, as a preface or a prologue written in the first person, with the speaker self-identifying as Alfred, could be accepted as the king's own. Nonetheless, an allowance needs to be made for the meaning of 'Alfred' which may, depending on new scholarship, shift more to 'Alfredian,' as new evidence may come to light that argues against the king's own personal involvement.

Before I consider ideas of kingship in the texts, it is necessary to consider more closely the composition of the various texts associated with the king, and his own potential involvement in the translation process. Alfred's role in the translation of the works associated with him has been debated for a long time. Janet Bately has argued that the Old English *Boethius*, the *Soliloquies*, the *Pastoral Care* and the *Psalms* show that one person was behind all translations, and that that person was probably King Alfred himself.<sup>205</sup> Godden, Irvine, and Griffith, however, note in their edition of the *Boethius* that its attribution to Alfred is doubtful.<sup>206</sup> Rather, they suggest, it may have originated in the early tenth century, or indeed — considering its frequent criticism of kings — not be related to the Alfredian court at all.<sup>207</sup> Nonetheless, as the discussion of the *Boethius* below will illustrate, the text can be seen as Alfredian in the first (wider sense) identified

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<sup>204</sup> Patrick P. O'Neill, "The Prose Translation of Psalms 1–50", in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, ed. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 94–95.

<sup>205</sup> Janet Bately, "Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything? The Integrity of the Alfredian Canon Revisited," *Medium Aevum* 78.2 (2009): 209.

<sup>206</sup> *Boethius, The Old English Boethius: an Edition of the Old English Versions of Boethius's De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. Malcolm Godden, Susan Irvine, and Mark Griffith, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140–145. See also Malcolm Godden, "King Alfred's Boethius," in *Boethius: His Life, Thought and Influence*, ed. Margaret Gibson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981): 419–424.

<sup>207</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 144–145.

by Janet Nelson. While probably not composed by Alfred himself, the translation emanated from the ideas and reform movement of Alfred's court. As Susan Irvine has commented regarding the work's prose preface, even if it was appended later by someone eager to present the text as Alfredian, "then ironically through its very lack of 'originality' it attests to Alfred's power as king and translator to confer authority on a literary work."<sup>208</sup> What is significant for the present discussion, then, is that the Old English *Boethius* demonstrates a distinct concern with the duties and authority of kingship. While often discussed as a translation, the vernacular text differs significantly from its Latin source material, as King Theoderic, for instance, receives more attention.<sup>209</sup> Moreover, the Old English text adds a passage that is directly concerned with the duties of kingship. These four texts together will be at the heart of this chapter, discussed in the order in which they are believed to have been written.

The law-code is the only text in this chapter that may appear to be incongruous. However, it merits inclusion for its interest in royal authority and unity, here approached from a legal perspective, and as a vehicle for the expression of an Alfredian interest in justice. Its main concern in this context is social order which, taking into consideration its probable production towards the end of Alfred's reign, provides us with insights into how the Alfredian ideal of kingship developed during the king's reign, and the extent to which this development was in line with the political situation at the end of the ninth century. The discussion of the law-code may, indeed, provide arguments for its inclusion in the Group.

Some comments also need to be made about those texts not included in this chapter. The reason for the exclusion of the *Dialogues* and the Old English *Orosius* is based on the current consensus that it is unlikely that Alfred was behind their translation—whether he was actively involved in translating them or not.<sup>210</sup> However, the same might be said for the Old English *Boethius*, as mentioned above. Nonetheless, while the *Dialogues* and the Old English *Orosius* may still be seen as 'Alfredian,' it would be

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<sup>208</sup> Susan Irvine, "The Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues", in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, eds. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 162.

<sup>209</sup> Godden, "The player king: identification and self-representation in King Alfred's writings", in *Alfred the Great: Papers from the Eleventh-Centenary Conferences*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 140.

<sup>210</sup> Richard Clement, "The Production of the Pastoral Care: King Alfred and His Helpers", in *Studies in Earlier Old English Prose*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 141.

difficult to argue convincingly for their having been an active part of the educational programme and its focus on the reconstruction and adaptation of conceptions of kingship. The *Dialogues* were, Asser tells us, translated by the bishop of Worcester, Wærferth, at Alfred's request.<sup>211</sup> As Susan Irvine has noted, the text was "probably composed before Alfred's translation programme was fully conceived or implemented."<sup>212</sup> Regarding the *Orosius*, Janet Bately has argued in her edition of the text that the vocabulary and syntax of the *Orosius* differs significantly compared to the *Boethius* and *Soliloquies*, and that "it seems quite impossible that these works as we have them could have been produced by one and the same man."<sup>213</sup> This does not, of course, exclude the possibility that these texts may have been composed by different authors at Alfred's court who were thus infused with 'Alfredian' thought. Godden has noted that it is quite possible that the translation dates to Alfred's reign.<sup>214</sup> However, the only possible link with the king is "of doubtful significance:" the passage detailing the travels of Ohthere, as allegedly told to King Alfred, was added later and possibly by a different author.<sup>215</sup> Most importantly, as the *Dialogues* and *Orosius* also have relatively little to add to an exploration of Alfredian conceptions of kingship, I will not discuss these texts separately in this chapter. Nonetheless, the *Orosius* will be referred to in comparison to the *Boethius*.

The role of historical texts such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and Asser's *Vita Alfredi* is more complex. Pauline Stafford has noted that "The historical works produced in the reign of Alfred, the Chronicle, Asser's *Life* of the king, the translations of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* and of Orosius, were stimulated by Viking attacks and the desire to explain or cope with them."<sup>216</sup> As stated already, the Old English *Orosius* has little to add when it comes to Alfredian visions of kingship, and Bede has been discussed in the previous chapter. As far as the Chronicle (or perhaps more accurately 'Chronicles') is concerned, it is deeply concerned with kingship, as Nicholas

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<sup>211</sup> Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, trans. *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and other contemporary sources* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 92.

<sup>212</sup> Susan Irvine, "Alfredian Prefaces and Epilogues", 147.

<sup>213</sup> Janet Bately, ed., *The Old English Orosius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), lxxiv.

<sup>214</sup> Malcolm Godden, ed. and trans., *The Old English History of the World: An Anglo-Saxon Rewriting of Orosius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), xi.

<sup>215</sup> Godden, *Old English History*, xi–xii.

<sup>216</sup> Pauline Stafford, *Unification and Conquest. A Political and Social History of England in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 6.

Brooks has argued.<sup>217</sup> Moreover, Barbara Yorke has concluded that while Alfred did not invent any of the events, he was involved in the editing process.<sup>218</sup> Janet Bately, however, has argued that Alfred did not have a hand in the creation of the Chronicle.<sup>219</sup> As a result, I have chosen to discuss the Chronicle, but not as a separate text. Rather than attempting to untangle the many and complex threads of information presented in the individual versions, and endeavouring to obtain any sense of Alfredian notions of kingship in them, some passages of the Chronicle that are specifically concerned with kingship will be examined, as indeed the Cynewulf and Cyneheard episode has been discussed in the previous chapter. As far as the *Vita Alfredi* is concerned, it will be used to provide context for the texts under discussion, as noted in the Introduction above. The king's biography, while clearly a piece of propaganda and written in Latin, nonetheless presents the reader, amongst other things, with a carefully crafted portrait of the king which shows us not so much who Alfred was, but how he wished to be seen. As such, it provides an important context for concepts of royal authority identifiable in the Alfredian Group. It also features heavily in the *Pastoral Care*, to which I will now turn.

## 2.2. The Pastoral Care

### 2.2.1. Introduction and the Preface

Pope Gregory the Great's *Liber Regulae Pastoralis* was the first text to be translated of the Alfredian Group, and one of the authors is identified in the preface as Asser. Gregory, who was Pope from 590 and 604, has a clear aim in his text: to set out and examine the characteristics a member of the clergy should have as the caretaker of people's souls. While specifically occupied with religious leadership, the *Pastoral Care*'s concern with wisdom and other attributes required of those in power made it a suitable starting point for Alfredian reform.

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<sup>217</sup> Nicholas Brooks, "Why is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle about kings?", *Anglo-Saxon England* 39 (2011): 43–70.

<sup>218</sup> Barbara Yorke, "The Representation of Early West Saxon History in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle", in *Reading the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: Language, History, Literature*, ed. Alice Jorgensen (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 158–159.

<sup>219</sup> Janet Bately, "The Compilation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle 60 BC to AD 890: vocabulary as evidence", *Proceedings of the British Academy* 64 (1978): 93–129.

Gregory's *Regula Pastoralis* may have reached England with Augustine's mission to Kent in the 597, as the Verse preface also states.<sup>220</sup> At least in part due to Alcuin of York it became a significant factor in the Carolingian reform movement, and Alfred may have first encountered it via Grimbald of Saint-Bertin, one of his scholars who had arrived in England after Alfred had requested help from Archbishop Fulk of Reims.<sup>221</sup> The Old English translation survives in six manuscripts, two of which are dated close to the composition of the authorial version, namely the Hatton and Tiberius manuscripts.<sup>222</sup> As Carolin Schreiber has remarked, "The preservation of several early copies is exceptional for an Old English text."<sup>223</sup> Based on the evidence of the extant manuscripts, then, the Latin version's popularity was mirrored by the Old English version's popularity in England, indicating its importance for the Alfredian reform programme.

The importance of the *Pastoral Care* for the programme is underscored in the text's preface.<sup>224</sup> Here we find an explanation of the rationale behind the Alfredian educational programme as a whole, written in the voice of the king himself. Whether this attribution to Alfred is correct or not, it is significant that the text states Alfred was responsible. As R. R. Edwards has noted, "Authorship is a demand for standing and intelligibility: to be an author is to be recognized and regarded as such."<sup>225</sup> Thus, authorship is closely connected to authority.

Research has tended to highlight Alfred's decision to translate those books "nidbeðyrfesta sien eallum monnum to witanne" (most necessary for all men to know),<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Carolin Schreiber, "Searoðonca Hord: Alfred's Translation of Gregory the Great's *Regula Pastoralis*", in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, eds. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 172.

<sup>221</sup> Scheiber, "Searoðonca Hord", 174–175.

<sup>222</sup> I have used the Hatton manuscript here, as the Tiberius manuscript only survives in fragments.

<sup>223</sup> Schreiber, "Searoðonca Hord", 177.

<sup>224</sup> I will here focus only on the prose preface and leave out the short verse preface and the translated Gregorian preface, as it continues and solidifies the content of the preceding prose preface. Where relevant it will be referred to in the chapter. For a more thorough analysis of the verse preface see Nicole Guenther Discenza, "Alfred's Verse Preface to the *Pastoral Care* and the Chain of Authority", *Neophilologus* 85 (2001): 625–33.

<sup>225</sup> R.R. Edwards, *Invention and Authorship in Medieval England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017), xv.

<sup>226</sup> Henry Sweet, ed., *King Alfred's Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care*, (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1872), 6.

and the many issues facing Wessex that prompted him to undertake this task.<sup>227</sup> Despite the importance of these observations for our understanding of Alfredian motives and attitudes towards learning, they also tend to obscure the overt concern shown in the preface, and indeed in the translation, with royal authority and identity as a result of that learning. A focus on these topics may also answer the question that arises from Alfred's assertion: why these books, rather than any others? The short answer, which will run as a thread through this chapter, is that these texts are amenable to being altered and reinterpreted in order to present the Alfredian narrative of a united Christian country under the rule of a wise king. The Preface's opening sentences reveal an interest in the relationship between learning and royal authority:

& ðe cyðan hate ðæt me com swiðe oft on gemynd, hwelce wiotan iu wæron giond Angelcynn, ægðer ge godcundra hada ge worul(d)cundra; & hu gesæliglica tida ða wæron giond Angelcynn; & hu ða kyningas ðe ðone onwald hæfdon ðæs folces (on ðam dagum) Gode & his ærendwrecum hersumedon; & hie ægðer ge hiora sibbe ge hiora siodo ge hiora onweald innanbordes gehioldon, & eac út hiora eðel gerymdon; & hu him ða speow æðer ge mid wige ge mid wisdom; & eac ða godcundan hadas hu giorne hie wæron ægðer ge ymb lare ge ymb liornunga. ge ymb ealle ða ðiowotdomas ðe hie Gode (don) scoldon; & hu man utanbordes wisdom & lare hieden on lond sohte, & hu we hie nu sceoldon ute begietan gif we hie habban sceoldon (ll. 2–13).<sup>228</sup>

And I would like it to be proclaimed that it very often came to my mind what learned men there were amongst the English in the past, both religious and secular; and how then there were blessed times amongst the English, and how the kings who had power over the people (in (those days) obeyed God and his messengers; and they preserved peace and customs and power within the country and also extended their realm; and how they succeeded both in war and wisdom; and how diligent the religious were both about teaching and learning, and also about all the holy services that they owed to God; and how people from

<sup>227</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 126.

<sup>228</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 4.

abroad sought wisdom and teaching in this country, and how we now have to obtain them from outside if we need to have them.<sup>229</sup>

After mentioning men of learning in England, Alfred moves immediately on to the topic of kings. He reveals a causal link between learning and royal power: when there was knowledge in the country, kings still had authority. This authority is manifested in two ways, as the king both protects his people and expands his country. The result is success in warfare and wisdom. According to Alfred then, wisdom is, like warfare, a product of royal authority, which is established through the king's learning. It is not just kings, however, who need to increase their knowledge: the religious orders also need to aspire to learning, and they have the additional task of teaching —after having been taught by the king, who had given them this book. As in the unspecified past Alfred refers to, the desired result of the kingdom's love of learning would be international renown, as once more foreigners would seek to be educated in Wessex.

The passage above also highlights another of Alfredian Group's vital concerns, namely the promotion of a shared identity and unity for the English. The kings who had power in the past imagined here held power over the 'Angelcynn,' the English, as a united people. The fact that this ideal may not have travelled much further beyond the West Saxon court does not stop the text from asserting its existence and emphasising its importance.<sup>230</sup> By next contrasting this *lond* with *ute*, the author also sets the tone for the next passage which further highlights his aims to create a sense of unity for the English, based on their shared language and religion. Leading up to his famous statement that he has ordered those texts 'most necessary' to be translated, he remembers nostalgically the "godena wiotona ðe giu wæron gion Angelcynn" (good men who formerly were in England), who did not translate these books "on hiora agen geðiode" (into their own language), because they did not expect learning to decay to such an extent.<sup>231</sup> Importantly,

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<sup>229</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>230</sup> It should be noted that that, as Patrick Wormald has argued, Alfred may have seen himself as the king of the English, but that there is hardly any evidence to suggest that people beyond the borders of Wessex agreed with him ("The Making of England", 26). Alfred's vision of a united England, then, was very much an idea that came into being during his reign, possibly to some extent related to the Viking threat and the desire for a united, Christian, defence. As Wormald has stated, however, 'The English State' didn't come into existence until the 10th and 11th centuries (27), especially under Alfred's grandson, Athelstan.

<sup>231</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 6.



Alfred states that all over England the people shared a common language. He then reinforces this common identity by referring to the law, which the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans, and “ealla oðra Cristena ðioda sumne dæl hiora agen geðiode wendon” (all the other Christian kingdoms translated them partly into their own language). Alfred here not only aligns his practice of translating texts with these famous and influential peoples, but also emphasises that translating texts into the vernacular is something every Christian kingdom did. As such, he positions his people as defined by their shared language and Christianity, presenting his kingdom as a successor to those great and holy civilisations of the past. Thus, by looking back to an imagined ideal of England’s past, in the preface Alfred sets out his aspirations for his kingdom’s future.

It is not important here whether or not this assessment of past learning in England is accurate. The term ‘imaginative memory’, used by Amy Remensnyder in her discussion of the foundation legends of monastic institutions, is appropriate in this context.<sup>232</sup> The preface constructs a memory of a past which serves Alfredian authority at a time when many threats faced the kingdom. Remensnyder notes that one of the social needs which can lead to an invocation of the past is a time of stress for the community: “when the community’s independence or very existence is in jeopardy, the construction of a common past assures the group of its (threatened) identity.”<sup>233</sup> This is, I argue, what the Alfredian Group attempts to achieve: a sense of unity, based on a shared past, language, and religion. More specifically, what matters here is that Alfredian authors promoted learning as the key to solving the issues the country was facing at the time. As king, Alfred’s royal authority is established by reminding the audience of a king’s duties, and by then showing him to be fulfilling them. At the same time, sense of unity is encouraged by painting a picture of the English people as having experienced blessed times in the past, and by emphasising how learning in the kingdom was so prominent that foreigners came to them to learn. The message is that, with Alfred as king, these times will return. Alfred’s audience is important in this context. *The Pastoral Care* survives in six manuscripts, one of which does not contain the name of the bishop to whom it was sent (and which may therefore have been the exemplar),<sup>234</sup> whereas in other manuscripts the names of bishops Werferth (of Worcester), Heahstan (of London), and Wulfsige (of

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<sup>232</sup> A.G. Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic Foundation Legends in Medieval Southern France* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1–2.

<sup>233</sup> Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past*, 2.

<sup>234</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 294.

Sherborne) are given.<sup>235</sup> In any case, the text was directed to those people high up in the ecclesiastical ranks. When considering Alfred's comments on the religious orders in the passage quoted above, his message is clear. He desires his ecclesiastics to perform their duties not only to God, but also as shepherds to the people. Alfred's aim as stated in the preface reflects Gregory's interest in Davidic kingship. As Daniel Orton has argued, Alfred's description of his inheritance of a decaying kingdom when it comes to learning mirrors David's situation when he inherited the throne. Alfred's kingship, he suggests, had to be a corrective one like David's kingship, in order to recover the learning that had been lost.<sup>236</sup> What makes Alfred's statement so noteworthy is his insistence on including not only learning but also teaching. The dissemination of wisdom is essential for a kingdom to thrive, and Alfred asks his bishops to take on this task. Here he foreshadows the entreaties of the *Pastoral Care* itself.

The aim of the text, to encourage bishops to learn and teach and to establish Alfred's authority, could arguably be undermined by the remark that successful kings obey God and his messengers. This remark, however, should be seen as a form of politeness rather than a genuine belief in the king's submission to the religious orders. Nicole Guenther Discenza has argued that the preface should be read as a letter: "constructing the *Pastoral Care* as a letter makes the readers recipients and subjects; the text directs them, and they must carry out its instructions."<sup>237</sup> Alfred instructs his bishops to become teachers, not just from his authority as king, but also as their teacher. He therefore assumes both secular and religious authority here by casting himself in the role of teacher-king. Once more this perspective reflects the concerns expressed in the subsequent translation. In this context, Alfredian authors took to heart Gregory's advice and constructed a new framework for the duties of kings: "Alfred's ultimate responsibility was the pastoral care of his people."<sup>238</sup> Alfred's kingship combined secular and religious authority, accelerating and steering a movement that reinterpreted the idea of Christian kingship. It is no surprise, then, that Gregory's *Regula Pastoralis* was the first text to be translated. Even though intended by Gregory as a guide to bishops in their role as religious leaders, it could also be read as a mirror for princes. As such, it is an ideal text for a

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<sup>235</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 294.

<sup>236</sup> Daniel Orton, "Royal Piety and Davidic Imitation: Cultivating Political Capital in the Alfredian Psalms", *Neophilologus* 99.3 (July 2015): 484.

<sup>237</sup> Discenza, "Alfred's Verse Preface", 627.

<sup>238</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 221.

translator to underline Alfred's role as leader and teacher of all his people, whether secular or religious.

### **2.2.2. The *Pastoral Care***

The Old English translation of Gregory's *Regula Pastoralis* is essential for our understanding of Alfredian royal authority. This may seem surprising, as the Old English version, unlike some of the other texts in the Alfredian Group, is a fairly faithful translation of the original. As such, then, it does not so much reflect Alfredian thought, but rather functions as a starting point: the fact that it was the first text to be translated not only emphasises its relevance for the Alfredian educational programme, but more crucially, as the first text, it launched a reinterpretation of royal authority. The *Pastoral Care*'s preoccupation with the dangers of power, most notably pride, its suitability for claiming both secular and religious authority, and its underlying and pervasive concern with wisdom and learning, made it an ideal foundation text for Alfredian writers in their attempt to construct a revised narrative of royal authority and unity. With this translation, Alfred is presented as a teacher, leading by Christian example just as Gregory prescribes in the text. It is then only logical that, as a good teacher, he wishes to pass on the work that taught him so much.

This reading of the text would also explain the echoes of Gregory's ideas in later texts, most notably Asser's *Vita Alfredi*, which incorporates in the figure of Alfred all the qualities associated with royal authority set forth in the *Pastoral Care* and its successors. Several themes emerge from a study of the text's authority that can be linked to subsequent Alfredian thought on royal power: the dangers of pride, the king's role as both secular and religious leader, and the central role of wisdom.

### **2.2.3. Pride and Power**

Gregory's concern about pride is a recurring theme in the translation as well. Indeed, it is pride that undermines the role that the teacher has been chosen to fulfil; a proud teacher cannot perform his job properly, as the Old English translation also indicates:

Forðon hie sua on ofermettum & mid (up)ahafenesse becumað to ðære are ðære are ðære hirdelecan giemenne, hi ne magon medomlice ðenian ða ðenunga, & ðære eaðmodnesse lareowas bion;<sup>239</sup>

Because they enter therefore with pride and arrogance into the honour of pastoral care, they cannot properly attend upon the ministration, to be teachers of humility there.

Keeping in mind that the translator extends the use of the text to include advice for kings, this also means that through pride a king can lose his position and bring sorrow to his people. Indeed, the text gives examples of proud kings, and points out that pride is a sin that is not always easily discernible:

Ne wende na Ezechias<sup>240</sup> Israhela kyning ðæt he (ge)syngade, ða he lædde ða ællðeodgan ærendracan on his maðmhus, & him geiewde his goldhord. Ac he onfunde ðeah Godes ierre on ðæm hearne ðe his bearne æfter his dagum becom.<sup>241</sup>

Nor did Hezekiah, king of Israel, suppose that he sinned, when he brought the foreign ambassadors to his treasury, and showed them his treasure. But nevertheless he discovered God's anger through the afflictions that came to his child after his days.

In his concern with proud kings in the *Regula Pastoralis* Gregory looks to the Old Testament, and as a result he is not short of examples. Another example concerns a Babylonian king, unnamed by Gregory but identifiable as Nebuchadnezzar, who demonstrated great pride at the marvellous city he had built; in contrast to Hezekiah, however, Nebuchadnezzar's pride was obvious and expressed. God's punishment was also severe, as the king was turned into an animal, and the Old English translation notes that "Se ilca se ð(e) wende ðæt he wære ofer ealle oðre men, him gebyrede (þæt he) nysse

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<sup>239</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 27.

<sup>240</sup> Hezekiah also plays an important part in the Psalms, see below.

<sup>241</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 39.

self ðæt he man wæs”<sup>242</sup> (To the same one who imagined that he was above all other man it happened that he himself did not know that he was a man).

Like Nebuchadnezzar, Alfred also wished to be known for his building work. However, in the *Vita Alfredi* Asser takes care to couple any praise for the king’s skills to an emphasis on the actual need for such work. When Asser, for instance, relates that in the year 886 Alfred “restored the city of London splendidly,” he adds that this was done “—after so many towns had been burned and so many people had been slaughtered— and made it habitable again.”<sup>243</sup> According to Asser, Alfred’s building work does not stem from a desire to be praised but from necessity, as it is his duty to look after his people. Gregory’s next comment must therefore have been of special interest to Alfred, and the translator renders it as follows: “Suaðeah, ðeah ic nu ðis recce, næ tæle ic na micel weorc ne ryhtne anwald, ac ic tæle þæt hine mon forðy upahebbe on his mode”<sup>244</sup> (Nevertheless, although I explain this now, I do not blame more great work nor just power, but I blame the man who is consequently arrogant in his disposition). Subsequent texts of the Alfredian Group show awareness of this notion, as does Asser. Alfredian writing pays due consideration to royal power and its legitimacy, and descriptions of Alfred’s good works are coupled with comments affirming the king’s humility.

The most relevant kings mentioned by Gregory in relation to pride are Saul and David. Gregory writes that Saul at first refused to become king as he deemed himself unworthy. Once king, however, he became proud, and the Old English version tells us that “Sua sua Saul s(e) cyning, æresð he fleah ðæt ric, & tealde hine selfne his suiðe unwierðne. Ac sona sua he ðone anwald onfeng ðæs rices, he astag on ofermetto”<sup>245</sup> (Thus king Saul at first fled from authority, and considered himself unworthy, but as soon as he took on the rule of the realm, he rose in pride). David is of special importance for Alfred’s reign, and Davidic elements form a pattern throughout Alfredian texts. Indeed, Daniel Orton has argued that the use of Davidic elements in Alfredian writing was intended to further unity, as this way Wessex could position itself as the new Israel, a people chosen by God.<sup>246</sup> Furthermore, as the Carolingians, and Charlemagne in particular, were also influenced by the Davidic model, Orton states that the West-Saxon courts emulated their

<sup>242</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred’s Version*, 39–41.

<sup>243</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 97–98.

<sup>244</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred’s Version*, 41.

<sup>245</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred’s Version*, 35.

<sup>246</sup> Orton, “Royal Piety”, 477.

interest in David.<sup>247</sup> The description of David's situation may well have been influential for other Alfredian texts.:

Sua eac Daut, ðe folneah on eallum ðingum Gode licode, sona sua he ða byrðenne næfde sua monegra earfeða, he wæs mid ofermettum gewundad, & ðæt suiðe wælhreowlice gecyðde on Urias slæge hi(s) agenes holdes ðegnes, for ðære scamleaslecan gewilnunge his wifes.”<sup>248</sup>

Likewise David, who pleased God in nearly everything, was wounded by pride as soon as he did not have the weight of so many difficulties, and cruelly revealed this by killing Uriah, his own faithful servant, for the shameless desire for his wife.

The translator then continues to compare David's previously good behaviour to his new sinful behaviour: the David who before had been so just and patient, now becomes vengeful and abuses his power. In the end, though, he is saved through his problems: “Sio scyld hine suiðe feorr of ealra haligra rime atuge, ðær him eft ða gesuinc & ða earfeðu ne gehulpen”<sup>249</sup> (His sins would have drawn him far away from all of the saints, if his troubles and difficulties had not helped him again). Pride, according to the author, is especially dangerous when a king has nothing else to worry about. As Abels has suggested, David may have been Alfred's preferred example for kingship, as indeed David was seen by many medieval biblical exegetes as “both the personification of earthly kingship and as a prefigurement of Christ.”<sup>250</sup> It is very tempting to interpret Asser's frequent descriptions of Alfred's troubles as an attempt to demonstrate that this is the one point where Alfred does not follow David's example. If we are to take Asser's word, Alfred was never without troubles, whether physical or political, and as such pride, he implies, could not possibly have been a danger to the king or, by extension, his country.

Pride, then, may result in a king's abuse of power, but in itself it can also be a consequence of a hunger for power. According to Gregory, a good ruler does not desire power but is selected to take it on due to his good qualities. Gregory presents Jesus as an

<sup>247</sup> Orton, “Royal Piety” ,482.

<sup>248</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 35.

<sup>249</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 37.

<sup>250</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 239.

example, stating that he did not wish to be king. This reluctance was not borne out of false humility, however, as the translation also makes clear: “Ne fleah he ðy rice ðy his dutyænig monn bet wyrðe wære, ac he wolde us ða bisen astellan, ðæt we his to suiðe ne gitæden.”<sup>251</sup> (He did not refuse power because any man was more honourable than he was, but he wanted to set an example, that we do not desire it too much). Authority, in other words, is only wrong if it is desired for its own sake, in which case it will lead to pride. Once more, Alfredian thought was influenced by Gregory’s writing, as Alfred is presented as a reluctant king. According to Asser, Alfred could have taken over his brother Æthelred’s throne whilst the latter was still alive, “for he surpassed all his brothers both in wisdom and in all good habits; and in particular because he was a great warrior and victorious in virtually all battles.”<sup>252</sup> The reason he did not usurp his brother’s throne was that he did not feel himself worthy. More importantly, Alfred is described as ruling “almost unwillingly (for indeed he did not think that he alone could ever withstand such great ferocity of the Vikings, unless strengthened by divine help...)”<sup>253</sup> Again Asser shows himself to be aware of potential criticism of Alfred’s authority, and counters it by clarifying that Alfred, like Jesus, had not desired to be king. His additional comment that Alfred did not think he could fight the heathens without God’s help is a clever tactic: the fact that Alfred did manage to defeat them in the end then indicates that he received divine help, thus strengthening his authority as given by God. This, in turn, was a vital component in the construction of a narrative of a shared identity.

#### 2.2.4. Assuming Ecclesiastical Authority

Alfredian writing is not only concerned with expanding and redefining secular lordship, but also with an assumption of ecclesiastical authority. The preface to the *Pastoral Care* has been discussed already, and it is worth stressing that Alfred is arguably at his most explicit here in his claim of authority over the religious orders. The preface contains a clear instruction to his bishops to increase their learning and be better teachers, emphasising Alfred’s own role as teacher of the ecclesiastical orders. The assumption of religious authority can also be seen in the light of defensive systems at a time of Viking attacks. For instance, Ryan Lavelle has noted that “ecclesiastical defensive

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<sup>251</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred’s Version*, 33.

<sup>252</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 80-81.

<sup>253</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 81.

responsibilities are significant in the study of this period,”<sup>254</sup> and Nicholas Hooper has shown the close links between the pre-Conquest navy and the ecclesiastical orders.<sup>255</sup> Nonetheless, the rest of the *Pastoral Care*, being a relatively faithful translation of the Latin original, would not seem to be suited to such an interpretation. However, as argued above, the *Pastoral Care* does not so much reflect Alfredian thought, but rather was its instigator and main source. Alfred answered Gregory’s call for leadership and learning, and a consideration of the translation can shed light on how the text may have inspired and influenced the Alfredian educational programme. The ship metaphor is of special importance here:

Swiðe eaðe mæg on smyltre sæ ungelæred scipstiera genoh ryhte stieran, ac se gelærede him (ne) getruwað on ðære hreon sæ & on ðæm miclan stormum. Hwæt is ðonne ðæt rice & se ealdordoom buton ðæs modes storm, se symle bið cnyssende ðæt scip ðære heortan mid ðara gðohta ystum, & bið drifen hider & ðider on swiðe nearwe bygeas worda & weorca, swelce hit sie ongemong miclum & monegum stancludum tobrocen? <sup>256</sup>

Very easily may an unskilled steersman steer well on a gentle sea, but the skilled one does not trust him on a rough sea and with great storms. What is then the realm and the ealdordom but the mind’s storm, that is constantly tossing the heart’s ship with thoughts’ storms, and is pursued here and there in very narrow straits of words and works as if it were suffering among great and many rocks?

In the *Regula Pastoralis*, Gregory uses this comparison to stress that those who are capable of ruling should not be afraid to show their leadership, and the translator keeps this interpretation. Asser once more uses a similar metaphor in his description of Alfred.<sup>257</sup> As Alice Sheppard has noted, the ship narrative was used in classical texts to

<sup>254</sup> Ryan Lavelle, *Alfred’s Wars: Sources and Interpretations of Anglo-Saxon Warfare in the Viking Age* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2010), 242.

<sup>255</sup> Nicholas Hooper, “Some observations on the Navy in Late Anglo-Saxon England”, in *Studies in Medieval History presented to R. Allen Brown*, ed. C. Harper-Bill, C. Holdsworth, and J.L. Nelson (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1989), 203–213.

<sup>256</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred’s Version*, 59.

<sup>257</sup> Apart from a purely metaphorical interpretation, Alfred’s interest in naval defence and ship building also points to an interest in this topic. See Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 305.



introduce the main point, and she states that we should also see Asser's use of it in this light.<sup>258</sup> Asser's comparison is as follows:

Yet once he had taken over the helm of his kingdom, he alone, sustained by divine assistance, struggled like an excellent pilot to guide his ship laden with much wealth to the desired and safe haven of his homeland, even though his sailors were virtually exhausted; similarly, he did not allow it to waver or wander from course, even though the course lay through the many seething whirlpools of present life.<sup>259</sup>

Whereas Gregory (and the Old English translator) use the metaphor to point out that good leadership requires qualities that are difficult to acquire and maintain, Asser expands the metaphor and clarifies it: Alfred possesses the correct qualities identified by Gregory, while also being able to correct his 'sailors,' and teach them by example of good leadership. Most important, however, is Asser's subsequent comment which explicitly states that the king's 'sailors' are not all secular:

For by gently instructing, cajoling, urging, commanding, and (in the end, when his patience was exhausted) by sharply chastising those who were disobedient ... he carefully and cleverly exploited and converted his bishops and ealdormen and nobles.<sup>260</sup>

The ship metaphor, then, helps us to understand how Alfred aimed to exercise control not just over his secular subjects but also over the religious order. The *Pastoral Care* is used as a textbook, to instruct bishops like a captain instructs his sailors. Asser elucidates the importance of this passage in the *Pastoral Care* when he adapts it specifically to include bishops in the groups of people under Alfred's rule. This stands in sharp contrast to the Carolingians: in Francia, bishops were gaining more autonomy, and ecclesiastics such as

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<sup>258</sup> Alice Sheppard, *Families of the King: Writing Identity in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 64.

<sup>259</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 101.

<sup>260</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 101.

Hincmar of Rheims criticised kings directly. Alfred, on the other hand, asserted his authority over his ecclesiastics by positioning himself as their lord and leader.<sup>261</sup>

Alfred's assumption of religious authority is also reflected in the terminology used in the translation of Gregory's text. The duties of kings and bishops demonstrated significant similarities in Alfred's time, with bishops frequently exercising secular power. These powers were often associated with legal matters, such as the right of bishops to make and maintain their own laws.<sup>262</sup> Indeed, legal matters required close cooperation between kings and bishops, as kings increasingly delegated their power in late pre-Conquest England.<sup>263</sup> The fusion of royal and ecclesiastical authority can be understood from a specific example in the *Pastoral Care*. Referring to the first 'shepherd,' St Peter, the text notes that "Ðurh Godes giefe he onfeng ðone ealdordom ðære halgan ciericean"<sup>264</sup> (Through God's gift he received authority of the Holy Church). In his discussion of the intermingling of secular and spiritual rule, Abels has pointed out the Alfredian translational choice for 'ealdordom' here, but has no more to add about its potential significance.<sup>265</sup> In the light of the present discussion, I consider the word 'ealdordom' to be a telling choice.<sup>266</sup> By inserting a term denoting authority into a text dealing specifically with religious authority, the text obscures the boundaries between religious and secular power. More important, however, is this choice in relation to the position of the ealdordom and its representative, the ealdorman, in Alfred's kingdom. An ealdordom was ruled by an ealdorman, and ealdormen were the king's representatives.<sup>267</sup> Consequently, the use of the word in this context places the rule of the Church at the same footing as that of an ealdordom, and both directly below the king's authority. Thus, rather than merely an example of the interweaving of religious and secular authority, the choice of the word 'ealdordom' asserts the king's own authority as higher than that of the clergy.

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<sup>261</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 267.

<sup>262</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 268.

<sup>263</sup> Alaric A. Trousdale, "Being Everywhere at Once: Delegation and Royal Authority in Late Anglo-Saxon England", in *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, eds. Gale Owen-Crocker and Brian W. Schneider (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 281.

<sup>264</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 115.

<sup>265</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 268.

<sup>266</sup> The *Dictionary of Old English* gives as the first translation for ealdordom 'authority, power'. *Dictionary of Old English: A to I* online, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2018), <https://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doe/>, accessed 7/12/2020.

<sup>267</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 272–273.

Concerning Alfredian pretensions to religious authority, we may conclude that, following Charlemagne's Davidic model, Alfred is cast as the 'priest-king.'<sup>268</sup> By selecting the *Pastoral Care* as the first text of the programme, by instructing bishops to become teachers, and by blending secular and religious language, the text reinforces the king's secular authority and assumes spiritual authority, whilst at the same time promoting unity with Alfred as the kingdom's divinely appointed ruler. The final and vital ingredient binding it all together is wisdom.

### 2.2.5. Learning and Wisdom

Alfredian writing's preoccupation with learning and wisdom is ubiquitous and lies at the very heart of the educational programme. Conversely, it must also be one of the most difficult themes to pin down, precisely because of its omnipresence. As such, the topic has already featured in the discussion so far, especially in relation to Alfredian thinking on the role of teaching. Indeed, as we have seen, learning is of crucial importance in the *Pastoral Care*, and it is clear that for Gregory, and by extension for Alfred, learning is "a qualification for those in positions of responsibility."<sup>269</sup> In itself, however, it is not enough for a responsible king, as it is also the king's duty to apply his acquired knowledge in his function and use it actively. In that light, one element still remains to be discussed, which concerns the figure of King Solomon.

Like King David, Solomon was seen both by the Carolingians and the English as an exemplary king. As Alice Sheppard has noted, the Carolingians saw in Solomon an example of a king's private interest and devotion to learning.<sup>270</sup> She writes that "at Alfred's court, these ideas are expressed in the Old English *Regula Pastoralis*, the content of which might productively be read as an Old English mirror. But, like the Frankish mirrors for princes, the recommendations of the Old English *Regula* subordinate the political to the private, moral, and devotional."<sup>271</sup> I would agree that the *Pastoral Care* may be read as a mirror, although the text is more complex than such a description might suggest. Indeed, as we have seen, the translator widens the scope of the text to include

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<sup>268</sup> Orton, "Royal Piety", 481.

<sup>269</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 29.

<sup>270</sup> Sheppard, *Families of the King*, 53.

<sup>271</sup> Sheppard, *Families of the King*, 53.

secular rulers, and the preface makes it clear that Alfred did not just intend it to be a mirror for his bishops, to be used to improve their own knowledge, as much as a text to be actively used as a tool for teaching. More important, however, is Sheppard's statement that the political aspect of the text is secondary to the private, devotional, aspect. I would argue that, regardless of Gregory's original intention, the text does the exact opposite in the hands of Alfred and his writers. Again, the instructions in the preface, and the positioning of the text as the starting point of an educational reform movement, rule out any interpretation of the work as intended to be studied in isolation. The circulation of the text and Alfred's instructions show that the text is taken out of the realm of private learning and placed into the wider world, where it is to be used as an instrument to achieve good leadership through knowledge. The text is therefore very much a part of the political domain, translated and circulated with a political motive (i.e. the combined strengthening of royal authority and unity, as discussed above).

Thus, considering the figure of King Solomon, I would argue that he is crucial to Alfredian thinking on wisdom—but not in the *Pastoral Care*. Indeed, the translation warns against men who desire wisdom but do not wish this to be useful to others:

Monige menn siendon, sua sua we ær cuædon, ðe bioð geweorðode mid miclum & mid monegum (Godes) giefum, & ðonne bioð onælede mid ðære gierninge ðara smeunga Godes wisdomes anes, & fleoð ðonne ða nyttyrðan hiersumnesse ðære lare,...<sup>272</sup>

There are many men, as we have said before, who are honoured with great and with many of God's gifts, and then are ignited with the desire for the search for God's wisdom only, and then avoid the advantageous humility of teaching.

For Gregory, as for Alfred, wisdom and teaching are intrinsically linked. Solomon may have been the primary example of wise kingship for the Carolingians, but Alfred is not content with learning for one's own sake. Furthermore, whereas the Carolingians were very much latinate, Alfredian writers took learning out of the private sphere and translated

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<sup>272</sup> Sweet, *King Alfred's Version*, 45.

texts into the vernacular.<sup>273</sup> I agree with Abels in concluding that Asser may have preferred to compare Alfred to Solomon, but the preferred example for Alfred is more likely to have been David.<sup>274</sup>

### 2.2.6. Conclusion

The role of the *Pastoral Care* for our understanding of Alfredian thinking on kingship has been highlighted by many scholars. The fact that the Alfredian translators did not make significant alterations to Gregory's original, as they certainly did with later translations, indicates that the original text met with Alfred's approval. Its central concern with wisdom and, most crucially, the teaching and thus dissemination of this wisdom, recur in later Alfredian texts. The warnings Gregory gives concerning the dangers of pride for a ruler find an echo in Asser's descriptions of Alfred, where he uses examples of both bad and good rulership in the *Pastoral Care* to create an image of royal perfection for Alfred himself. However, the text's importance is greater than just as a starting point for Alfred's image of good kingship. As I have argued, it is actively used to promote royal power, by assuming ecclesiastical authority, while also furthering a sense of unity by highlighting similarities between the English and the Israelites and, by extension, King Alfred and King David. Like David, Alfred has been chosen to correct the kingdom's sins, and wishes to unify the country by emphasising their shared Christianity. The text's preface has been shown to provide significant context for the Alfredian ideas behind the *Regula's* translation. Alfred not only uses it to clarify his aims, namely for bishops to apply themselves to learning and teaching, but also to highlight the importance of this wisdom for the country as a whole. These ideas find further expression in the Old English *Boethius*.

## 2.3. The Old English Boethius

The translation of the *Pastoral Care* marks the initial steps towards a reinvigorated narrative of royal authority, and the crucial function wisdom plays in its formulation. Indeed, Abels has stated that wisdom was "the source of all other virtues" for Alfred, and

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<sup>273</sup> David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 124.

<sup>274</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 239.

that this can be seen most clearly in the Old English *Boethius* and the *Soliloquies*.<sup>275</sup> Both of these texts feature considerable alterations compared to their Latin originals, and as such provide significant insights into Alfredian thoughts on kingship and power. In the case of the *Boethius*, unlike the *Soliloquia*, the original contains clear reflections on leadership, which I will discuss as well. As Ronald Ganze has noted, the alterations in the Old English *Soliloquies* reveal concerns with philosophical thought on free will, and a theological perspective on the immortality of the soul.<sup>276</sup> However, Ganze also identifies an interest in politics and the role of a monarch in the text, which I will explore next.

### 2.3.1. Introduction

Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae* was a popular work in the Middle Ages, and the alterations discernible in the Old English translation show a preoccupation with kingship.<sup>277</sup> The original already had good reason to question the power of kings. As a Roman official, Boethius served King Theoderic (r. 493–526). However, Boethius was captured and imprisoned on suspicion of plotting against the king and was executed in 525. His work, written while in prison, is cast in the form of a dialogue between Boethius and Lady Philosophy. Philosophy provides solace to the despairing Boethius by helping him reflect rationally on his circumstances.<sup>278</sup> Thus, authority and leadership already form part of the Latin text's fabric. The Old English version survives in two manuscripts. The first is dated to the mid-tenth century and contains the later prosimetrical version, providing translations of the original prose into Old English prose, and the original meters into Old English alliterative verse. The second, dated to the twelfth century, contains the earlier prose version, featuring prose translations of the Latin meters.<sup>279</sup> I will use the earlier, prosimetrical version here (also referred to as the C version).<sup>280</sup> The Old English

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<sup>275</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 246.

<sup>276</sup> Ronald J. Ganze, "The Individual in the Afterlife: Theological and Sociopolitical Concerns in King Alfred's Translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*", *Studia Neophilologica*, 8.3.1 (01 June 2011): 21.

<sup>277</sup> Erica Weaver and A. Joseph McMullen, "Reading Boethius in Medieval England: *The Consolation of Philosophy* from Alfred to Ashby", *The Legacy of Boethius in Medieval England: The Consolation and Its Afterlives*, ed. A. Joseph McMullen and Erica Weaver (Tempe, Arizona: ACMRS, 2018), ix.

<sup>278</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 30–31.

<sup>279</sup> Nicole Guenther Discenza, *The King's English: Strategies of Translation in the Old English Boethius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>280</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 18–20.

*Boethius* differs from the original Latin in several ways, beginning with the overall structure of the text. The dialogue in the Old English version takes place between Boethius (sometimes Mind) and Wisdom, immediately highlighting the importance of wisdom and learning in the text. The translation also promotes a more overtly Christian interpretation of the original, demonstrated in the added material, such as the prayer at the end of the translation.

One of the main issues involved with interpreting the Old English *Boethius* as a text demonstrating a king's concerns with royal power is the fact that, together with the *Soliloquies*, it appears to show sympathy for outcast thegns and advisers, as Malcolm Godden has noted.<sup>281</sup> This sympathy can, apart from the character of Boethius himself, be seen in the passage dealing with the Roman nobleman Liberius, who “wæs to manegum witum geworht forðæm þe he nolde meldian on his geferan þe mid him siredon ymb ðone cyning þe hie ær mid unrihte gewunnen hæfde” (was subjected to many punishments because he did not want to inform against his companions who had plotted with him against the king who had earlier conquered them unjustly.)<sup>282</sup> In response, Janet Bately has pointed out that “with four older brothers who all became king, or sub-king, before him, one of whom —Æthelbald—appears nearly to have succeeded in dethroning their father, he must surely have been frequently marginalized by sycophants and royal favourites, at times even becoming personally highly vulnerable.”<sup>283</sup> I agree with Bately that it is not unlikely that Alfred had observed or had even been at the receiving end of the abuse of royal power. Even when disregarding this personal angle, Alfredian sympathy for outcast advisers and disapproval of tyrants need not be remarkable. Indeed, as I am arguing that the Alfredian texts together played an active part in the process of reshaping the king's authority and the promotion of unity, I consider examples of bad kingship in these texts to perform a vital role. In this instance, the king's unfitness to rule is emphasised, and Liberius' loyalty praised. Both of these elements are important in the new Alfredian vision of kingship. In addition, Asser includes a story about a crime in his biography of Alfred, and then proceeds to defend its inclusion by referring to the Bible, where “the foul deeds of the unrighteous are sown among the holy deeds of the righteous.”<sup>284</sup> He continues to explain that both should be recorded: “the good deeds, that

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<sup>281</sup> Godden “The player king,” 150.

<sup>282</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 416.

<sup>283</sup> Bately, “Did King Alfred Actually Translate Anything”, 191.

<sup>284</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 104.

is, so they may be praised, followed, emulated, and their imitators may be esteemed worthy of every holy honour; the evil deeds, on the other hand, that they may be disparaged, cursed, and entirely shunned, and their imitators reproached with all hatred, contempt and punishment.”<sup>285</sup> Approaching the Old English *Boethius* as a part of Alfred’s reform programme, we can recognise the practical application of Asser’s words in the translation. Alfredian writers did not shun examples of bad kingship in their writing, because neither does the Bible. Examples of flawed kingship were provided so they can be avoided. Moreover, these examples could, when treated with caution, assist the king and his writers to establish Alfred as the exact opposite, as the image of good kingship.

The Old English version shows a concern with the divine purpose behind earthly troubles, and the role of wisdom in understanding this purpose and its relation to power. This becomes clear in both the translated parts of the text as well as the additions. I will therefore not merely discuss the text’s alterations because the original Latin also shows concern with royal authority, and the fact that a translator makes the decision to translate a passage faithfully can be telling in itself. The discussion of the *Pastoral Care* has shown this, as here the preface places the translation in a new context. The Alfredian translation strategy meant that “he stuck closely to a text if he agreed with what he was reading, or if he considered it authoritative.”<sup>286</sup> Thus, while alterations may demonstrate Alfredian thinking more clearly, a faithful translation suggests agreement, and should therefore not be ignored if it demonstrates thinking about kingship and royal power.

Royal authority in the Old English *Boethius* is presented in two ways: on the one hand, we have the historical figure of King Theoderic, and shorter references to other rulers such as Tarquin and Nero, whose abuse of the power entrusted to them serves as an example that should not be followed. Power is also examined more indirectly, where the narrative voice appears to become the king’s own, reflecting concerns with the tools a king needs to exercise his authority properly, and offering first insights into a creation of a self-image. It is here that the old English *Boethius* distinguishes itself most from the other texts of the Group, with the exception of the *Soliloquies*. In the Old English *Boethius*, the presentation of an Alfredian vision of royal authority becomes a defence of a king’s power. After having established Boethius’ good qualities and Theoderic’s bad qualities, there are moments where the royal voice takes over. It is in these passages that

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<sup>285</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 104.

<sup>286</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 242.



we can see a justification of royal power, in which the translator sets out his wishes for the kingdom, underscoring the fact that Alfred's kingship combines secular tradition with more overtly Christian values such as moderation and lack of pride. I will argue that the Old English *Boethius* becomes a vehicle for an Alfredian reconstruction and vindication of royal authority, which contains appeals to the people to recognise that any materials and tools Alfred desires are not for his own use, but are necessary for the pursuit of wisdom and for the well-being of the whole kingdom, both now and in the future.

### 2.3.2. The Preface

As with the preface to the *Pastoral Care*, the preface to the translation of Boethius' work gives the reader useful information on the processes involved in Alfred's programme. The preface's claim that Alfred is the translator has been subjected to criticism, for instance by Irvine and Godden, who regard the attribution as doubtful.<sup>287</sup> Nonetheless, the preface marks the text as having similar aims to the other Alfredian texts, and whilst it is not possible to be certain that Alfred was its author, it can be seen as part of an Alfredian tradition. In other words, even if it was not translated and adapted by Alfred, it emerged from the same set of ideas emanating from his court.

The preface's comments on translational practice are quite likely amongst the most often cited passages of Alfredian writing:

Hwylum he sette worde be worde, hwylum andgit of andgite, swa swa he hit þa sweotolost and andgitfullicast gereccan mihte for þam mislicum and manigfealdum weoroldbisgum þe hine oft æper ge on mode ge on lichoman bisgodan.

Sometimes he put it down word for word, sometimes sense for sense, in such a way that he could translate it most clearly and intelligibly with the various and manifold worldly difficulties that often occupied him both in the mind and in the body.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 140–145.

<sup>288</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 383.

This description suits the Alfredian Group as a whole, as the translations often feature significant alterations. Here, the alterations reflect Alfredian concerns. The “sense for sense” method is, therefore, very much a subjective one: it refers to the sense of the text as the Alfredian author interpreted it and considered it useful as part of the wider programme. Indeed, the ghost of Gregory lingers over the remainder of the preface. The remarks on the process of translation are immediately followed by the reference to the king’s earthly problems, which is later followed by a similar statement:

Da bisgu us sint swiþe earfoþrimu þe on his dagum on þa ricu becoman þe he underfangen hæfde, and þeah ða he þas boc hæfde geleornode ond of Lædene to Engliscum spelle gewende, þa geworhte he hi eft to leoðe swa swa heo nu gedon is.<sup>289</sup>

The afflictions that happened in his days and in his realm that he had received are difficult to count, and yet when he had learned this book and had translated it from Latin to English prose he then again turned it into verse as has been done here.

The use of ‘þeah’ here is significant, as it encapsulates what the author is trying to do in the preface. As opposed to the *Pastoral Care*’s preface, which aimed to explain Alfred’s vision of wisdom and to urge his bishops to take action, this time the author establishes an image of Alfred as a wise king, while avoiding coming across as proud. The preface also aims to highlight Alfred’s continuing interest in learning and wisdom which is, as usual, carefully balanced by references to the king’s troubles, once more following the Davidic model. The influence of Gregory’s writing is perhaps most clearly indicated in the final sentence, after Alfred has asked to be pardoned for any mistakes: “ælc mon sceal be his andgites mæðe and be his æmettan sprecaþ þæt he sprecð and don þæt þæt he deð”<sup>290</sup> (Each man must, according to the degree of his understanding and his leisure, speak what he speaks and do what he does).

This sentiment, fulfilling one’s duties according to one’s abilities, is an important tenet in the Old English *Boethius*. The preface’s task is not just to introduce the following

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<sup>289</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 383.

<sup>290</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 383.

translation, but also to embed the text firmly into the translation programme as a whole. Indeed, its references to worldly problems are, in fact, what links this translation to the programme. Alfred's earthly problems were the starting point of his wish to revive vernacular learning, and they are also one of the main concerns of this translation. The Latin original stems from the writer's desire to overcome earthly difficulties, but in Alfredian author's hands these issues are examined from a more overtly Christian perspective, as he debates the divine purpose behind the king's troubles. Once more, then, the preface contextualises the subsequent translation, allowing us to see how this text may have been of personal significance to Alfred.

#### 2.3.4. Historical Kingship: The Role of Theoderic

The focus on Alfred's troubles mentioned in the preface is continued in the first meter of the translation, which provides historical context to Boethius' original. The first verse tells us how the Goths steadily increased their kingdom, eventually crossing the Alps into Italy. The role of the Goths is made clear early on, as they are identified as the villains of the text: they "geþrungon þeod-lond monig" (oppressed many countries, l.3), were "gylpes full" (full of pride, l. 8), and were "guðe gelysted, folc-gewinnes" (desiring of war, and battle l. 9–10). The Goths conquer Rome, and the Romans suffer greatly:

fleah casere  
mid þam æðelingum    ut on Crecas.  
Ne meahte þa seo wea-laf    wige forstandan  
Gotan mid guðe;    gio-monna gestrion  
sealdon unwillum    eþel-weardas,  
halige aðas:    wæs gehwæðeres waa.  
Peah wæs mago-rinca    mod mid Crecum,  
gif hi leod-fruman    læstan dorsten. (ll 20b–27).<sup>291</sup>

The emperor fled with the princes to the Greeks. Then the survivors could not oppose the Goths in battle, in conflict; The nation's guardians unwillingly gave up the wealth of men of old, with holy oaths: It was a misfortune in every way. Yet their minds were with the Greeks, if they dared to follow their king.

<sup>291</sup>

*The Old English Boethius*, 384.

The importance of this addition has, in my view, been underestimated. As Malcolm Godden has noted, the similarities between the situation that the Romans found themselves in would have resonated with Alfred, who found himself in similar circumstances with the Vikings.<sup>292</sup> It is this similarity that provides an important connection between the preface and the rest of the translation. Alfred's 'worldly difficulties' are specified here as his attempts at resisting the various threats posed by the Viking armies. The departure of the Roman leader and the giving up of treasure in the *Boethius* may well reflect Alfred's exile at Athelney and his (largely unsuccessful) attempts to bribe the Vikings into leaving his kingdom. Moreover, the sacred oaths may have held special importance due to their Christian nature, as the Romans, being Christian, would have felt bound by their oaths whereas their heathen conquerors would not — a situation painfully familiar to Alfred, who attempted several times to keep his heathen tormentors at bay by having them swear oaths, which were then soon broken.<sup>293</sup>

The translation's first verse, then, immediately establishes a connection between the historical past and Alfred's present. In doing so, it equates Alfred and his people to the Romans. The Old English *Boethius* differs from the Old English *Orosius* in this respect, as Malcolm Godden has noted.<sup>294</sup> The Old English *Orosius* is relatively sympathetic to the first Gothic invaders, with one of their two kings, Alaric, described as a good Christian king, "whose gentle sacking of Rome was an act of the most merciful divine punishment for the sins of the Romans."<sup>295</sup> There is no mention of any Christianity amongst the Goths, nor of Roman sinning, until we arrive at the description of Theoderic. The descriptions of the Goths as cited above, though, demonstrate some highly unchristian behaviour, and the reference to pride is a clear sign that no Christian goodness can be expected.

The breaking of oaths and promises is an important element in the establishment of Theoderic's untrustworthiness, and creates a link to Alfred's dealings with the Vikings. Many years after the sack of Rome Theoderic rises to power, which the verse describes as follows: "oðþæt wyrd gescraf / þæt þe ðeodrice þegnas and eorlas / heran sceoldan.

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<sup>292</sup> Godden, "King Alfred's *Boethius*", 419.

<sup>293</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 148–150.

<sup>294</sup> Malcolm Godden, "The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: rewriting the sack of Rome", *Anglo-Saxon England* 31 (2002): 63–64.

<sup>295</sup> Godden, "The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths", 63.

/Wæs se here-tema /Criste gecnoden, cyning selfa onfeng /fulluhtþeawum”<sup>296</sup> (Fate judged that soldiers and noblemen must follow Theoderic. That army-leader was dedicated to Christ; the king himself received baptism, ll. 29b–34b). The Romans are happy and Theoderic makes many promises. That all is not well is foreshadowed by what the poet does not say here rather than what he does say; it is due to fate, not God’s will, that Theoderic becomes king, even though he is ostensibly a Christian king, underlined by the fact that he has been baptised. His subsequent betrayal is therefore the more shocking: “He þæt eall aleag. / Wæs þæm æþelinge Arrianes / gedwola leofre þonne drihtnes æ.” (He threw it all aside. Arius’ heresy was dearer to the prince than God’s law, ll. 39b–4).<sup>297</sup> The short sentence stating the betrayal contrasts sharply with the longer ones preceding and following, highlighting the king’s deception. Not only does Theoderic break his promises to the Romans, but he also betrays God by receiving baptism and then going against His commands. Significantly, Theoderic hardly features in the original Latin, which casts the city’s rulers and Boethius’ personal rivals as his main enemies.<sup>298</sup> Why, then, is Theoderic’s role expanded in the translation? The answer lies in the comparison the translation has already established between the situation of the Romans and that of Alfred’s kingdom. As the Goths can be compared to the Vikings, Theoderic can be seen as referring to the Viking leader Guthrum, with whom Alfred had many encounters. More significantly, Alfred had first-hand experience with Guthrum’s untrustworthiness when it came to swearing oaths. In 876 Alfred was forced to negotiate with Guthrum to affect the latter’s retreat from Wareham. Having some experience with the Vikings’ oath-breaking by this point, he pragmatically decided to have his opponents swear oaths to leave his country “on the holy ring —a thing which they would not do before any nation.”<sup>299</sup> As Abels has noted, the ‘holy ring’ was in fact “an arm-ring associated with the worship of Thor.”<sup>300</sup> The practice of swearing ring-oaths is attested in Scandinavian legend and, whether or not this was a literary topos rather than an actual practice, the fact that Asser associates the ring-oath with the Vikings suggests at the very least that English were familiar with its symbolism.<sup>301</sup> Unfortunately for Alfred the tactic

<sup>296</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 385.

<sup>297</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 385.

<sup>298</sup> Godden, “The player king”, 140.

<sup>299</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 149.

<sup>300</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 149.

<sup>301</sup> Anne Irene Riisoy, “Performing Oaths in Eddic Poetry: Viking Age Fact or Medieval Fiction?”, *Journal of the North Atlantic* 8 (2016): 143–144.

did not work in the long term, and according to Asser “practising their usual treachery, after their own manner, and paying no heed to the hostages, the oath, and the promise of faith, they broke the treaty, killed all the hostages they had,...”<sup>302</sup> This description is reminiscent of Theoderic: like Guthrum, Theoderic made empty promises, and proved himself to be untrustworthy. Moreover, Wisdom openly laments those who practise “lease lot” (deceptive deceit, l. 46), as “nu on worulde her monnum ne deriað mana aðas” (Now here in this world men are not injured by their false oaths, ll. 47b–48).<sup>303</sup> For an Alfredian translator, Guthrum’s oaths would have been wicked indeed, and even worse was that he benefited from this. Another similarity with Guthrum can be found in the mention of Theoderic’s baptism, as Guthrum himself was eventually converted and baptised as well. It is quite possible, then, that a ninth-century readership would, in the figure of Theoderic, have seen similarities with Guthrum, who in turn influenced the expansion of the historical king in the translation.

The translation’s description of Boethius, which makes use of royal imagery, stands in sharp contrast to its depiction of Theoderic. This description is important, as it reflects the translator’s own imagining of the role of Boethius, who in the original only figures as a first-person narrator. He is introduced as follows:

Da wæs ricra sum on Romebyrig  
 ahefen heretoga, hlaforde leof  
 penden cynestole Creacas wioldon.  
 ðæt wæs rihtwis rinc; Næs mid Romwarum  
 sincgeofa sella siððan longe.  
 He wæs weorulde wis, weorðmynða georn,  
 beorn boca gleaw; Boitius  
 se hæle hatte se þone hlisan geþah (ll. 46–53).<sup>304</sup>

Then a powerful man was made consul in Rome, beloved to his lord while the Greeks held the royal throne. That was a just man. There was amongst the Romans no better treasure giver for a long time after. He was worldwide, eager

<sup>302</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 83.

<sup>303</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 390.

<sup>304</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 385.

for honours, a man wise with books. The man who gained this fame was called Boethius.

What makes this passage significant is its royal imagery. Boethius is not a king, and yet he displays characteristics traditionally associated with good kingship, ones Alfred was especially keen to be associated with himself: Boethius is just, he gives treasure, and he is wise. Generosity and an interest in justice are important aspects of lordship, as the last chapter has also shown, and are also integral to the Alfredian royal image. According to Asser, Alfred "...applied himself attentively to charity and distribution of alms to the native population and to foreign visitors of all races, showing immense and incomparable kindness and generosity to all men."<sup>305</sup> Alfred's interest in justice is attested in his law-codes, but according to Asser the king was also personally involved in the legal system. Not only would the king attend judicial hearings, dispensing justice when no agreement could be reached, but "he would carefully look into nearly all the judgments which were passed in his absence anywhere in his realm, to see whether they were just or unjust."<sup>306</sup> Boethius, then, exhibits characteristics important to Alfred and the image he was eager to project. Indeed, based on the many connections between Boethius' and Alfred's situations, I would argue that Boethius is used as Alfred's representative, or narrative voice, in this text. This interpretation could also go some way to explain the problem signalled earlier, namely that the text is critical of kingship (Theoderic's) and supportive of the king's wronged adviser (Boethius). Theoderic's kingship is established early on as not being legitimate, as he does not have God's support and breaks his oaths. Boethius, on the other hand, displays characteristics of good leadership, despite the fact that he is not actually a king. His role in the rest of the translation is twofold, as he plays the parts of just leader and of wronged adviser to an unjust king. As such, he is established as the perfect vehicle for expressing Alfredian thinking on royal authority.

### 2.3.5. The Theory and Practice of Kingship

Nonetheless, the role of Boethius as a speaker is not without its problems, one of which is centred on Boethius's marginal authoritative voice compared to that of Wisdom. As I have argued, the text's apparent criticism of kingship is not so unequivocal as might be

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<sup>305</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 91.

<sup>306</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 109.

thought initially. When it comes to a consideration of theoretical kingship (by which I mean a theoretical discussion of kingship and power rather than performed actions), the figure of Boethius becomes more problematic. One of the main issues with viewing Boethius as a figure of authority is, as Malcolm Godden has highlighted, that Boethius as a speaker does not carry any authority in the text apart from one passage. According to Godden, throughout most of the text the figure speaking with authority is Wisdom.<sup>307</sup> I agree that Wisdom is in most cases the figure with actual authority in the text. However, the fact that Wisdom is cast as a teacher has, in my opinion, not been given enough consideration. In the Latin original, Wisdom is named Philosophy who, after lamenting finding Boethius in such a sad state, says that now “is the time for the physician’s art, rather than for complaining.”<sup>308</sup> Philosophy presents herself first and foremost to Boethius not as a teacher, but as a physician. This role is also expressed by Boethius himself, who says: “So when I turned my eyes towards her and fixed my gaze upon her, I recognised my nurse, Philosophy, in whose chambers I had spent my life from earliest manhood.”<sup>309</sup> The word ‘nurse’<sup>310</sup> suggests a more personal relationship than a teacher-student one, with an implied concern for someone’s overall well-being, both rational and emotional. In the Old English version, however, this interpretation is narrowed down, and Wisdom represents only the rational aspect of the character’s problems, functioning as a teacher. This teacher-student relationship is indicated in Wisdom’s very first words: “Hu nu eart ðu se mon þe on minre scole wære afeded and gelæred?”<sup>311</sup> (How are you now the man who was nourished and educated in my school?). Soon after, Wisdom says: “Gewitaþ nu awirgede woruldsorga of mines þegenes mode forþam ge sind þa mæstan sceapan”<sup>312</sup> (Take heed now, cursed worldly sorrows of my student’s mind, because you are the most harmful).<sup>313</sup> We can see how very early on in the translation Wisdom establishes his own

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<sup>307</sup> Godden, “The player king”, 145.

<sup>308</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. W.V. Cooper (London: J.M. Dent and Company, 1902), 6.

<sup>309</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation*, 6.

<sup>310</sup> ‘Nutricem,’ from ‘Nutrix,’ in the Latin. Boethius, *De consolacione philosophiae*, ed. Claudio Moreschini (Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2005), 9.

<sup>311</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 387.

<sup>312</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 387.

<sup>313</sup> ‘Þegenes’ here carries an interesting meaning, as it is most usually translated as servant or retainer, suggesting a hierarchical, but not educational, connection between people. The decision to translate it as ‘student’ here is partly influenced by the context, and by the fifth entry in the Bosworth Toller dictionary which suggests the translation ‘a follower of a teacher, a



and Boethius' role in the text: Boethius' mind was a student at Wisdom's school, and his problems arose because he did not apply the knowledge he had learned from his teacher.<sup>314</sup> The significance of this departure from the Latin text has, in my view, not been sufficiently acknowledged. The alteration exposes an Alfredian theme, namely the importance of wisdom and teaching. Considering the importance Alfred and his authors attached to wisdom, it is fitting that the personification of Wisdom in the text carries most authority.

This discussion does highlight the difficulty in distinguishing the different voices in the text. Susan Irvine has noted that a "multipatterned layer of voices" provides ways for an author or translator to utilize the past in order to understand the present.<sup>315</sup> As Godden writes:

If Boethius the author splits himself, as it were, between Philosophy and a representation of himself which we might call Boethius the prisoner, Alfred then introduces himself as a third party engaged in a dialogue with Boethius the author, speaking at times through the first speaker, Wisdom, and at times through the second, called 'Boetius' or Mod.<sup>316</sup>

Where exactly could we then find an Alfredian voice discussing royal authority? The alterations to the dialogue's form show distinct Alfredian concerns, but attempting to identify specific thoughts risks interpreting comments as distinctly Alfredian or demonstrating concerns with royal authority when they in fact do no such thing. Nonetheless, I will argue that there is indeed a clear royal voice, and that this voice uses Boethius as a reimagined historical character to give expression to notions of kingship and power. Boethius, or 'Mind,' expresses concerns that are recurring in ideas promoted in the Alfredian Group, whereas Wisdom symbolises the duty of every Christian to teach.

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disciple.' "þegen," Bosworth Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, accessed 03/01/2020, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/031613>.

<sup>314</sup> Susan Irvine has noted that Wisdom is presented as a foster-mother, and that "... foster-motherhood is seen to be bound up closely with education." Susan Irvine, "Foster-Relationships in the Old English *Boethius*", in *Childhood and Adolescence in Anglo-Saxon Literary Culture*, ed. Susan Irvine and Winfried Rudolf (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 214.

<sup>315</sup> Susan Irvine, "English literature in the ninth century", in *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature*, ed. Clare E. Lees (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013), 230.

<sup>316</sup> Godden, "The player king", 137.

Whilst Godden stresses that Boethius was not a king, and that it is therefore problematic to identify a royal voice in his narrative, it is important to remember that Boethius was, in fact, a powerful man. The terminology used to describe Boethius conforms to the Alfredian ideal of kingship, as we have seen. This differs greatly from the original text which presents Boethius as “an unjustly condemned philosopher.”<sup>317</sup> The passage that explores royal authority most overtly (and which Godden has identified as the one passage where Boethius speaks with authority)<sup>318</sup> begins with a favoured theme, namely the desire for power and the ensuing dangers of pride:

Eala Gesceadwisnes, hwæt þu wast þæt me næfre seo gitsung and seo gemægð þisses eorðlican anwealdes forwel ne licode, ne ic ealles forswiðe ne girnde þisses earðlican rices, butan tola ic wilnode þeah and andweorces to þam weorce þe me beboden was to wyrccanne.<sup>319</sup>

Oh Reason, you know very well that avarice and power of this earthly dominion never pleased me, nor did I yearn very much for all this worldly power, except that I desired the tools and the materials for the work that I was commanded to do.

The royal voice here takes over from Boethius, repeating the idea that a good ruler does not wish to rule, but accepts authority as his duty. This statement functions as an opening for a defense of deploying royal power. In order to do exercise this power, however, a ruler needs his people to cooperate:

Hwæt þu wast þæt nan mon ne mæg nænne cræft cyðan ne nænne anwald reccan ne stioran butan tolum and andweorce. (...) Þæt bið þonne cyninges andweorce and his tol mid to ricsianne þæt he hæbbe his lond fullmonad. He sceal habban gebedmen and ferdmen and weorcmen. Hwæt þu wast þætte butan þissan tolan nan cyning his cræft ne mæg cyðan.<sup>320</sup>

<sup>317</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 238.

<sup>318</sup> Godden, “The player king,” 143.

<sup>319</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 421.

<sup>320</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 421. The use of the word *cræft* is important here, as Alfred uses it not just with its traditional meaning (‘power, physical skill and craftsmanship, mental

Surely you know that no man can show any skill nor extend his rule or steer without tools and material. (...) That then is the king's material and his tools with which to rule that he has his land fully manned. He must have men who pray and soldiers and labourers. Surely you know that without these tools no king can show his skills or his might.

The translator here presents us with a model of mutual dependency. The king is in charge of steering his kingdom to safety, but cannot do so without the right material. It is important to point out that, as Ann Williams has noted, Alfred is not so much talking about rank when he divides his people into these three groups, but about function.<sup>321</sup> That not all of the king's followers were enthusiastic about their functions can be observed from Asser, as he laments "And what of the mighty disorder and confusion of his own people—to say nothing of his malady—who would undertake of their own accord little or no work for the common needs of the kingdom?"<sup>322</sup> Asser places special importance on the undertaking of work for the common good, and again points out that unfortunately not all of the king's followers were convinced by the necessity of his plans. The results, according to Asser, were disastrous when enemies attacked: "...then those who had opposed the king's commands were humiliated in meaningless repentance by being reduced to virtual extinction."<sup>323</sup> Asser suggests that it is vital for the survival of the kingdom that everyone performs their duties properly according to their function in society.

Whereas Asser includes his comments to demonstrate the enormous tasks Alfred had before him, especially when it comes to convincing his citizens to obey his

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ability'), but also, uniquely, as a translation of the Latin *virtus*. See Nicole Guenther Discenza, "Power, skill and virtue in the Old English Boethius", *Anglo-Saxon England* 26 (Jan. 1, 1997). The word is also a favoured translation in the other texts of the Group and, intriguingly, in Old English poems such as *Beowulf* and *The Gifts of Men*. See Peter Clemoes, "King Alfred's Debt to Vernacular Poetry: the Evidence of *ellen* and *cræft*", in *Words, Texts and Manuscripts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture Presented to Helmut Gneuss*, ed. Michael Korhammer (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992).

<sup>321</sup> Ann Williams, *The World Before Domesday: The English Aristocracy 900–1066* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), 1.

<sup>322</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 101.

<sup>323</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 102.

commands, in the Old English *Boethius* the necessary material and power for a king is, in what may seem a rather complex passage, linked to a desire to be remembered after death:

Forþy ic wilnode andweorces þone anwald mid to reccenne, þæt mine cræftas and anweald ne wurden forgitene and forholene, forþam ælc cræft and ælc anwald bið sona forealdod and forsugod, gif he bið buton wisdom; forðæm ne mæg nan mon nænne cræft bringan buton wisdom; forðæm þe swa hwæt swa þurh dysig gedon bið ne mæg hit mon næfre to cræfte gereccan. þæt is nu hraðost to secganne þæt ic wilnode weorðfullice to libbanne þa hwile þe ic lifde, and æfter minum life þæm monnum to læfanne þe æfter me wæren min gemynd on godum weorcum.<sup>324</sup>

For that I wanted material with which to exert power, so that my skills and rule would not be forgotten and concealed, because every skill and every rule soon grows old and is removed, if it is without wisdom; because no man can produce any skill without wisdom; since that which is done through foolishness man cannot explain as skill. To say that most briefly, I wished to live honourably during my life, and after my life to leave to those who were after my memorial in good works.

This passage reflects the educational programme's general interest in wisdom and knowledge, but as the only passage where Boethius (or Mind) speaks with royal authority, it also provides an insight into Alfred's personal concerns. What becomes apparent is a desire for all the materials the king needs so that he can lead an exemplary and honourable life, resulting in fame which will last even after his death.<sup>325</sup> In order to achieve this, it is important for a king and his people to be able to rely on each other: the king is expected to protect his people, but cannot do so if the people do not obey his commands. For Alfred, wisdom is the only possible way out of this dilemma. Wisdom's reply to this passage can be seen as criticism of this idea, as he discusses the dangers of pride that follow such a desire for fame. However, in doing so he actually reinforces Mind's words. On a deeper level, it reconciles the heroic desire for fame after death and to be remembered on earth

<sup>324</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 421–422.

<sup>325</sup> This is a familiar contemporary concern, also discussed in the previous chapter.

with the Christian focus on humility and the afterlife, and the rejection of pride.<sup>326</sup> After pointing out the futility of fame, Wisdom says:

Forðy sceolde ælc mon bion on ðæm wel gehealden þæt he on his agnum earde  
licode. Þeah he nu maran wilnige, he ne mæg furðum þæt forðbringan, forþæm  
þe seldhwonne bið þætte auht manegum monnum anes hwæt licige.<sup>327</sup>

Therefore each man must be well satisfied that he is liked in his own country.  
Though he now desires more, he cannot accomplish even that, because it is  
seldom that any one thing pleases many men.

This statement is reminiscent of the preface, where Alfred also acknowledges the limitations of human understanding and time. The pre-Conquest desire for fame and for one's name not to be forgotten after death is tempered by a religiously inspired realism. Ambition itself, then, is not problematic, as long as it is realistic and does not turn into pride.<sup>328</sup>

One way for a king to acquire fame is through his generosity which, as discussed above, is also one of the *Boethius*' characteristics, and an important feature of secular pre-Conquest kingship.<sup>329</sup> Generosity was used to cement bonds between a king and his followers, and in return a ruler could expect loyalty. As such it was a crucial element in the foundation and maintenance of social order and a kingdom's security. As Abels has noted, "In a world shaped by the ethos of reciprocity, a good king was by necessity an open-handed lord."<sup>330</sup> Asser describes himself as having been the recipient of the king's

<sup>326</sup> Again, this is reminiscent of *Beowulf*.

<sup>327</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 424.

<sup>328</sup> Discenza, referring to Proppe, has highlighted an earlier passage relating to fame, where Wisdom clarifies that fame and power are not necessarily bad, but only "false glory and wrongful power and immoderate reputation" are reprehensible. Discenza, "Power, skill and virtue", 99.

<sup>329</sup> Generosity was not only a heroic ideal, but also a Christian one. Indeed, it should be noted that the two should not be seen in opposition, but rather as approaching the same ideals, from a different starting point and with a different aim. Asser, for instance, mentions Alfred's generosity as also including "charity and the distribution of alms" (Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 91). The use of charity and alms here suggests a generosity inspired by a religious sentiment. What distinguishes the secular generosity is the expectations it raises from the receiver, which is why the secular generosity is at the centre of the discussion here.

<sup>330</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 38.

almost limitless largesse, and the *Vita Alfredi* regularly stresses Alfred's general beneficence.<sup>331</sup> In the Old English *Boethius*, generosity is strongly connected with fame and the building of self-image. Speaking about wealth, Wisdom says:

(...) ðeah bið hliseadigra and leofwendra se ðe hit selð þonne se ðe hit gaderað and oðrum reafað. Ge eac þa welan bioð hliseadigran and leoftælan þonne þonne hi mon selð þonne hi bion ðonne hi mon gadrað and hilt.<sup>332</sup>

(...) yet he is more renowned and amiable who gives it than he who collects it and seizes it from others. And also riches are more pleasing and dear when one gives them than when they are collected and kept.

Wisdom neatly summarises the contemporary approaches to the ideal of generosity, as it not only assists the receiver but also reflects well on the giver, who acquires fame: "Genoh sweotol þæt is þætte god word and god hlisa ælces monnes bið betra and diorra þonne ænig wela."<sup>333</sup> (It is sufficiently clear that the good word and a good reputation of every man is better and dearer than any wealth). A good ruler then distributes his riches wisely, and the result is greater than a continued dependency between giver and receiver: a king's good name and fame will strengthen his authority.

Finally, some comments need to be made about the role of moderation. Moderation in the Old English *Boethius* is explicitly linked to wisdom, and as such is of great significance:

Swa swa wisdom is se hehsta cræft and he hæfð on him feower oðre cræftas; þara is an wærscipe, oðer gemetgung, ðridde is ellen,<sup>334</sup> feorðe rihtwisnes.<sup>335</sup>

<sup>331</sup> On the former see Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 96–97. On the latter, see 101–102.

<sup>332</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 408.

<sup>333</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 408.

<sup>334</sup> 'Ellen,' like 'cræft,' carries a complex meaning and is also used in *Beowulf*, and Clemoes argues that originally it was used in a martial context. The meaning, however, changed due to a Christianised context. Its use was in decline by Alfred's time, and Clemoes sees its continued use by Alfred as a sign of his appreciation of Anglo-Saxon poetry. See Peter Clemoes, "King Alfred's Debt", 217–223.

<sup>335</sup> *The Old English Boethius*, 445–456.

So wisdom is the highest virtue, and it contains four other virtues: one is prudence, the other moderation, the third is strength, the fourth justice.

These categories recur regularly in the Alfredian Group, and I have already pointed out Alfred's own interest in dispensing justice and the fact that Boethius is described as a just man. Nonetheless, moderation is arguably the most pronounced of these categories in the Old English *Boethius* and thus merits some further scrutiny. The format of the text, being a dialogue between Mind and Wisdom, already suggests this: Wisdom continuously advises moderation, calm, and restraint at times of distress. There are also more overt references. When discussing the pointlessness of desiring worldly goods, Wisdom states:

Gif þu þonne þæt gemet habban wille and þa nyðþearfe witan wille, þonne is þæt mete and drync and claðas and tol to swelcum cræfte swelce þu cunne þæt þe is gecynde, and þæt þe is riht to habbenne.<sup>336</sup>

If then you want to have moderation and want to know what is necessary, then that is food and drink and clothes and tools for such a skill which you know is most natural to you, and that is right for you to have.

The relevance of this comment lies in the latter part; of course, everyone needs basic tools for survival, but moderation also applies to those tools that a person needs to meet responsibilities. Alfred, as we have seen, has been very clear about what he needs to govern. He may have been accused of being immoderate with his demands but, he seems to say, it is not immoderate at all to wish to possess the material one needs to do one's job well. In a text that is so openly concerned with, and defensive of, what a king needs to govern, it seems reasonable to include a caveat in case accusations of immoderation are levelled against the king. In his defence, Alfred says, it is wise (because asserted by Wisdom) and not at all immoderate to acquire those tools a king requires to fulfill his tasks.

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<sup>336</sup>

*The Old English Boethius*, 410.

### 2.3.6. Conclusion

To conclude, the Old English *Boethius* continues the pattern set by the *Pastoral Care* of examining Christian wisdom and its uses. Its changes to the Latin original often call attention to royal authority, such as what a king requires in order to fulfill his tasks properly. Theoderic is presented as an example of a bad king, someone who breaks oaths and whose Christianity is deceptive, which may associate him with Guthrum. Boethius himself, on the other hand, is not a king but still someone who used to have considerable power and influence. He also displays many of the characteristics of a good ruler. The text is openly critical of rulers, but not indiscriminately so. The translation does not disapprove of rulers in general, but only of those who abuse their power. The passages that discuss kingship indirectly demonstrate this. Ideally, a king and his people accept their mutual dependency, and perform their roles accordingly. A generous, just, and wise king may expect his followers to obey his commands. A king who undermines this relationship, then, is an unjust king because he endangers social order, and with that a kingdom's safety. This idea also serves as a defence of Boethius' behaviour: it is Boethius who exhibits the characteristics of a good ruler, not Theoderic, and as such his actions in plotting against the king, if true, would have been justified. Conversely, a just and good king, such as Alfred is imagined to be, should expect to be obeyed. If not, he cannot assert his authority properly, which is potentially dangerous not just for him but for the kingdom as a whole. Both the Boethius-Theoderic and Alfred-subjects relationships therefore highlight dependency, and the importance of each doing what they may be expected to do according to their functions. To illustrate this, the text presents the reader with an Alfredian voice, creating an image of a ruler who is worthy of his people's obedience. Godden has stated that "if there is an Alfredian voice favouring kingship, it is buried deep in contexts which work hard against it."<sup>337</sup> While there may be no voice favouring kingship *in general*, I have argued that there certainly is a voice favouring the kind of Alfredian kingship that the translator envisages, in which a king acquires fame through his wisdom, eagerness for justice, and generosity, and in which a king's commands are obeyed when they are issued for the common good of the realm.

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<sup>337</sup>

Godden, "The player king", 145.



## 2.4. The *Soliloquies*

### 2.4.1. Introduction

Alfred's translations of the *Soliloquies* and the *Boethius* are often discussed together, which is not surprising. Both are structured as dialogues between an 'ic' (Augustine in the case of the *Soliloquies*) and Reason, and the 'ic' appears to be a retainer or counsellor.<sup>338</sup> These discussions, however, usually focus on the *Boethius* rather than the *Soliloquies*. Indeed, Augustine's Latin text was not one of his most popular during the Middle Ages and, combined with the fact that its main discussion revolves around the soul's immortality,<sup>339</sup> this may go some way to explain its relative obscurity. Nonetheless, the Alfredian version, which survives in two manuscripts,<sup>340</sup> is worthy of greater scrutiny, especially as it makes considerable changes to the original, as Ganze has noted: "We may conclude that Alfred is changing the meaning as well as the emphases of Augustine's text. In doing so, he is asserting his own self, his own desires, and his own understanding over and above Augustine's."<sup>341</sup> These alterations, Ganze has noted, highlight a vital shift in focus compared to the original; Whereas Augustine wants to know about God and his soul, Alfred is interested in the self and the other.<sup>342</sup> In other words, the work is transformed from an essentially inward-looking text into a primarily outward-looking one. This makes the additions, rather than the translation itself, significant for this study, as they provide insights into the Alfredian vision of royal authority and the relationship between a king and his people. This shift to a more outward looking text can be seen most clearly in the Alfredian additions concerning the material world, which show an attempt to reconcile earthly life and eternal life, and a secular and religious worldview. Indeed, as in the *Boethius*, the translator is concerned with uniting the kingdom's secular reality and Christian ideals and hopes for the future.

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<sup>338</sup> See for instance Bately, "Did King Alfred actually translate anything?", 190

<sup>339</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 31.

<sup>340</sup> Paul Szarmach, "Augustine's Soliloquia in Old English", in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, eds. Nicole Guenther Discenza and Paul E. Szarmach (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 229. For a fuller treatment of the two manuscripts and their differences, see Paul E. Szarmach, Alfred's Soliloquies in London, BL, Cotton Tiberius A. iii (art. 9g, fols. 50v-51v)", in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge, Vol. II*, eds. Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe and Andy Orchard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 153–179.

<sup>341</sup> Ganze, "The Individual", 25.

<sup>342</sup> Ganze, "The Individual", 37.

When it comes to representations of power, the Alfredian alterations to the *Soliloquies* offer a better-defined vision of royal authority than the *Boethius*, placing special emphasis on earthly rulership rather than God's divine power. The text is more succinct here in the defence of the king's function and what he needs to fulfill it properly. Moreover, the theme of royal beneficence is foregrounded even more, stressing the *Soliloquies'* profound and central concern with the relationship between a ruler and his people. Richard Abels has stated that "the overall impression one receives from the *Soliloquies* is of a king who expected obedience and deference from his followers, and of a conventionally pious man, impatient with metaphysical abstractions, but impassioned about the pursuit of wisdom."<sup>343</sup> Whilst I agree with Abels' statement in general, it belies the reciprocal nature of Alfredian views on kingship. *The Soliloquies*, more so than any other of the Alfredian Group's texts, is concerned with the king's expectations of and duties towards his people, and positions him as an intermediary between God and the people. Despite being significantly shorter than the *Boethius* (and perhaps precisely because of its being shorter), the text shows greater awareness of the role of a worldly leader and his relationship with both those below and those above him in the hierarchy.

Accordingly, with the use of wisdom as guiding principle, the *Soliloquies* are used to promote a concept of kingship that unites traditional secular and religious views of authority. To this end the translator does not only set out his expectations of his people, but also explores and defends the necessary reciprocal nature of the relationship between a lord and his people, and between God and the king. Ultimately, then, the *Soliloquies* formulates a view of kingship that is inclusive and reciprocal, yet with a clear sense of hierarchy and the duties that each person has in this world. The result is a stronger image of royal authority and social order. In order to demonstrate this, I will look at the relationship between a lord and his servant as a secular concept integrated into a Christian sense of hierarchy, the role of generosity in this context,<sup>344</sup> and the worldly ruler's need of loyalty and obedience, some of which also find expression in the text's preface.

#### 2.4.2. The Preface

The preface to the *Soliloquies* has garnered some scholarly interest, mainly due to its central metaphor. This metaphor, on the gathering of wood for building, instantly

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<sup>343</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 241.

<sup>344</sup> Religious and secular are not used as complete opposites here, but as representing different approaches to the same issues.

entrenches the text firmly in this material world, striking a tone remarkably different from the original which does not contain a preface and begins with Augustine's questions related to his soul and the nature of God. In both tone and style the preface also differs from those of the *Pastoral Care* and the *Boethius*, as it is less formal (conceivably due in part to the absence of a directly indicated audience) and its purpose less clearly stated. Indeed, Eric Stanley has indicated that, since the preface starts abruptly with "Gaderode me þonne kigclas and stuþansceaftas" (Then I gathered for myself supports and props),<sup>345</sup> it is possible that it is incomplete, although this is far from certain. As Stanley has argued, the word 'þonne' suggests a preceding text, which is lacking.<sup>346</sup> Valerie Heuchan has suggested that the preface's final paragraph fulfills this role, as it is of a more practical nature. However, if correct, this would be a rather curious decision, as it does not solve the odd placement of 'þonne.' Heuchan has also raised the possibility that "if the *Soliloquies* is a more personal, contemplative text, it may not have needed a preface like that for the *Cura Pastoralis* which was seemingly intended as an instruction manual for leaders of the kingdom."<sup>347</sup> Whilst I agree that the *Soliloquies* could be seen as a more reflective text compared to its predecessors, categorising it as more personal implies a restriction of its use and interest to the king's own private sphere. This idea is undermined by the exhortation in the preface which, while perhaps less obvious than the one in the *Pastoral Care*'s preface, is still undeniably present. I suspect that the reason it has been overlooked relatively often may lie in the fact that it is part of the extended metaphor, which could have diverted attention away from its presence. Moreover, rather than a direct call to action, here Alfred appears to kindly request his people to obey his will, bringing to mind Asser's comment on the king's different tactics in obtaining his citizens' cooperation.<sup>348</sup> In this case, Alfred uses the preface to 'gently instruct' or 'cajole' his people and to set out his vision of the use of worldly skills for the common good here on earth and for an easier transit to eternal life.

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<sup>345</sup> All citations of the Old English *Soliloquies* come from Hargrove's edition. Henry Lee Hargrove, ed., *King Alfred's Old English Version of St. Augustine's Soliloquies* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1902). All translations are my own.

<sup>346</sup> E.G. Stanley, "King Alfred's Prefaces", *RES* 39 (1988): 357.

<sup>347</sup> Valerie Heuchan, "God's Co-Workers and Powerful Tools: A Study of the Sources of Alfred's Building Metaphor in his Old English Translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies*", *Notes and Queries* 54.1, Oxford University Press (March 2007): 3.

<sup>348</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 10.

The aim for this text is set out in the preface's extended metaphor, which encompasses the first part of the preface.<sup>349</sup>

Gaderode me þonne kigclas, and stuþansceaftas, and lohsceaftas, and hylfa to ælcum þara tola þe ic mid wircan cuðe, and bohtimbru and bolttimbru to ælcum þara weorca þe ic wyrcan cuðe, þa wlitegostan treowo be þam dele ðe ic aberan meihte. Ne com ic naþer mid anre byrðene ham, ðe me ne lyste ealne þane wude ham brengan, gif ic hyne ealne aberan meihte. On ælcum treowo ic geseah hwæthwugu þæs þe ic æt ham beþorfte. Forþam ic lære ælcne ðara þe maga si, and manigne wæn hæbbe, þæt he menige to þam ilcan wuda þar ic ðas stuðansceaftas cearf, fetige hym þar ma, and gefreðrige hys wænas mid fegrum gerdum, þat he mage windan manigne smicerna wah, and manig ænilic hus settan and fegerne tun timbrian þara, and þær murge and softe mid mæge on eardian ægðer ge wintras ge sumeras, swa-swa ic nu ne gyt ne dyde. Ac se þe me lærde, þam se wudu licode, se mæg gedon þæt ic softor eardian ægðer ge on þisum lænan stoclife be þis wæge ða while þe ic on þisse weorulde beo, ge eac on þam ecan hame ðe he us gehaten hefð þurh Sanctus Augustinus and Sanctus Gregorius and Sanctus Ieronimus, and þurh manege oððre halie fædras; swa ic gelyfe eac ðæt he gedo for heora ealra earnunge ægðer he þisne weig gelimpfulran gedo þonne he ær þissum wes, ge huru mines modes eagan to þam ongelichte þæt ic mage rihtne weig aredian to þam ecan hame, and to þam ecan are, and to þare ecan reste, þe us gehaten is þurh þa halgan fæderas. Sie swa.<sup>350</sup>

Then I gathered for myself supports and props, and bolts, and halves for each of the tools that I could work with, and bog-timbers and bolttimbers for each of the works that I could do, as many of the finest trees as I could carry. Neither did I come home with a load, though it does not please me if I could not carry them all. On every tree I saw something that I needed at home. Thus I instruct everyone who is strong and has many waggons, that from the same wood where I carved the props fetches home many more, and loads his waggons with fair

<sup>349</sup> I have left out the very last part, which introduces the text and St Augustine as its original author.

<sup>350</sup> Hargrove, ed., *King Alfred's Version*, 1–2.

reeds, so that he may weave many beautiful walls, and build many impressive houses and construct fair villages and live there pleasantly and undisturbed with kinsmen both in winter and in summer, as I have not yet done. But he who taught me, to whom the wood is pleasing, may cause that I live more undisturbed both in this borrowed habitation on this way while I am in this world and also in the eternal home that he has promised us through Saint Augustine and Saint Gregory and Saint Jerome, and through many other holy fathers. As I believe likewise that he does for all of their merits both make this way more suitable than it was and also open my mind's eyes to the light so that I can find the right way to the eternal home, and to eternal honour, and to eternal rest, which is promised to us through the holy fathers. May it be so.

Whereas the Alfred of the earlier prefaces can be described as contemplative, explaining the reasons for translating a text and the translational practice, the Alfred we see here is an active figure. From the first word the speaker is in movement, busily 'gathering' materials. The metaphor is an apt one, considering Alfred's interest in the construction of buildings.<sup>351</sup> The active rather than reflective tone provides an interesting parallel with the translation itself which transforms the original from strictly spiritual work into a text that acknowledges the importance of current life and usefulness of its resources: materials, then, are not just a metaphorical reference to texts, but also a reminder of actual concrete materials used for construction. Through the comparison the author aims to demonstrate that it is indeed possible to lead a useful earthly life whilst striving for the eternal one.

In his active gathering of materials which, as Heuchan has stated, stand for the writings of the Church Fathers,<sup>352</sup> Alfred fulfills his role of being a good teacher in the way Gregory had advocated in the *Pastoral Care*, namely by giving the right example. In any case, here Alfred gathers as many different materials as he can which, while at times difficult, is ultimately necessary in order to live 'murge and softe' in this life. In his role as active teacher, however, the people are urged to join the king and follow his lead. It is

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<sup>351</sup> See Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 101. Alfred's interest in building, therefore, is both literal and figurative: he is preoccupied with the actual, physical, structures (for example as defensive systems) as well as the 'building' of a united English (and Christian) kingdom.

<sup>352</sup> Heuchan, "God's Co-Workers", 3. However, it may well also refer to Alfred's actual building efforts, as mentioned above, on which see Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 199–207.

here that the Christian teacher-student relationship recurring in several texts of the Alfredian Group conflates most clearly with the secular notion of mutual dependency and reciprocity between a lord and his people. A king cannot carry all the materials by himself, and therefore asks those who can to do as he has done. Importantly, they are to go to ‘þam ilcan wuda.’ Alfred is a teacher who is specific in the sources his students are encouraged to use.

As mentioned earlier, according to Asser Alfred variously used several techniques in order to get his subjects to do his bidding, and here we encounter one of the gentlest. Both ‘cajoling’ and ‘gently instructing’ would fit the metaphor, but most striking is the absence of sorrow and nostalgia so vividly present in the prefaces to both the *Pastoral Care* and the *Boethius*. This time, we are not confronted with the king’s many difficulties, whether of a political or personal nature; nor do we encounter laments on a long-gone, and better, past. Indeed, the current preface appears to do the opposite. It presents the reader with a narrative firmly rooted in the natural world and the present, with a promising vision of what an investment in earthly usefulness, using earthly materials, may yield in the afterlife. Adjectives such as ‘gefreðrige,’ ‘fegrum,’ and ‘murge and softe’ aim to create a vision of what life in Alfred’s earthly kingdom could be like under the ideal of reciprocal lordship, with persuasion rather than fear as the driving force.

The preface’s second part weaves together these different strands in its comparison between the traditional ‘lænland’ and ‘bocland,’ i.e. leased land or land given by charter, putting it into a religious context by identifying ‘lænland’ with earthly life (as it can be removed) and ‘bocland’ with eternal (and thus inalienable) life.

Nis hit nan wundor þeah man swilc ontimber gewirce eac on þære utlade and eac on þære bytlinge; ac ælcne man lyst, siððan he ænig cotlyf on his hlafordes læne myd his fultume getimbred hæfð, þæt he hine mote hwilum þaron gerestan, and huntigan, and fuglian, and fiscian, and his on gehwilce wisan to þere lænan tilian, ægbær ge on se ge on lande, oð þone fyrst þe he bocland and æce yrfe þurh his hlafordes miltse gecearninge. Swa gedo se wilega gifola, se ðe egðer wilt ge þissa lænena stoclife ge þara ecena hama. Se ðe ægþer gescop and ægþeres wilt, forgife me þæt me to ægðrum onhagige, ge her nytwyrtðe to beonne, ge huru þider to cumane.<sup>353</sup>

<sup>353</sup>

Hargrove, *King Alfred’s Version*, 1–2.

It is not any wonder however that a man works with such material both in the carrying and in the building; but every man desires, since he has built a dwelling on land borrowed from his lord with his assistance, that he can rest there sometimes, and hunt, and fowl, and fish, and in every way provide for himself on the leased land, both on sea and on land, until he has earned bookland and an eternal gift through his lord's mercy. So the generous giver does, he who rules both this borrowed habitation and the eternal home. He who both created and rules others, permit me to be in accordance with each, both to be useful here and especially to go to that place.

In this usage of Old English terminology for the expression of a Christian hierarchy, the role of the lord emerges as well. In this life, a man needs his lord's assistance to build his dwelling, just as he needs God, the 'wilega gifola,' and his beneficence to enter heaven. The earthly ruler may provide leased land, but only God rules both 'lænland' and 'bocland,' illustrating his position as king of both heaven and earth through his generosity. In this way the secular concept of generosity, binding ruler and retainer together in reciprocity, is reappropriated and integrated into a Christian structure.

To conclude, the preface supports the Alfredian narrative in two ways: it reflects the king's personal interest in building, and compares the active life of this world and its natural resources with the spiritual, eternal, life. With this the author paves the way for the translation which also continues to intermingle both Christian and secular notions of leadership. The focus on nature and a lord's relationship with his people, based on generosity, is accommodated in a Christian hierarchy with God as ruler of all. Crucially, this vision is not a static but a dynamic one, entrenched in this world rather than the next, as it calls for active participation and cooperation between lord and subjects. Using a gentler technique and tone than in previous prefaces, the audience receives a more clearly defined view of Alfredian royal authority, which is explored further in the following translation.

#### **2.4.3. *The Soliloquies***

The Alfredian alterations to Augustine's *Soliloquia* show deep concerns with secular rule and social order, with a focus on worldly affairs. The relationship between a king and his people is invoked again in order to maintain this social order on earth. S.J. Hitch has noted

that “most of Alfred’s substantial changes to the *Soliloquies* are made at points where Augustine himself was having difficulty.”<sup>354</sup> Augustine makes no secret of the fact that he is experiencing difficulties with his arguments, and the translator looks to Augustine’s later work and the works by Gregory the Great to resolve the text’s issues.<sup>355</sup> As mentioned in the introduction above, the Alfredian version is not merely a simplified interpretation of the original. A royal perspective is added, blurring the speaker’s identity, for in the additions Augustine speaks from a distinctly royal perspective.<sup>356</sup> More importantly, the alterations show a concern for worldly affairs. This earthly perspective does not replace Augustine’s spiritual focus, but is used to explain Augustine’s more abstract arguments in a way that is more relevant to a late ninth-century audience. In the Old English version, knowledge of earthly rulership is used to gain understanding of God. This perspective also allows authors to reinforce the role carved out for the king in the previous texts, namely that as intermediary between God and his people, in which he has already shown himself to assume the roles of teacher and, at times, an ecclesiastical role. In the *Soliloquies*, the king’s authority is once more established and the audience reminded of the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the king and his people. The tone, however, seems to be more urgent, which makes sense when we consider the *Soliloquies* as one of the later translations, created at a time of increased political unrest.<sup>357</sup> It implies that, just as God helps those who believe in Him and follow His commands, and rewards them after death, so will the king reward his people when they obey him. The secular approach to generosity is integrated into a vision of Christian kingship. The author aims to explain Augustine’s abstract reasoning about the spiritual world and God by comparison to earthly affairs and his own rulership. This focus on earthly rule therefore combines older English traditions and Christian ideals, and reflects Alfredian concerns with royal authority and its practical uses. Compared to previous texts of the Alfredian Group, however, the reciprocal nature of the King-people and God-people relationships

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<sup>354</sup> S.J. Hitch, “Alfred’s Reading of Augustine’s *Soliloquies*”, *Sentences: Essays presented to Alan Ward on the occasion of his retirement from Wadham College, Oxford*, ed. D.M. Reeks (Bosphoros Books, 1988), 22.

<sup>355</sup> These issues mainly arise from Augustine’s aim to integrate neoplatonism with Christian doctrine (Hitch, “Alfred’s Reading”, 23). Hitch argues that Alfred’s changes result in a text that is not only more complete, but also better, than Augustine’s original.

<sup>356</sup> As I only discuss Alfred’s additions here, which often take on the royal voice, I will use the names Augustine’ and ‘Alfred’ interchangeably to refer to the ‘ic’ in dialogue with Reason.

<sup>357</sup> See, for example, Abels, *Alfred the Great*, chapter 9 on the renewed Viking activity in the 890s.



carries a stronger emphasis on the importance of loyalty, obedience, and the whole kingdom's active participation to maintain social order.

The Old English interpolations to Augustine's text that relate to earthly rule are of a varied nature. The first example that discusses a lord's rule occurs in Book 1. Here the author adds a long passage on virtues, in which 'Augustine' expresses his difficulty in renouncing those things he is familiar with in favour of abstract virtues. Reason replies:

Ic wundrige hwi (þu) swa spece. Geþenc nu gyf ðines hlafordes ærendgewrit and hys insegel to ðe cymð, hwæðer þu mæge cweðan þæt ðu hine be ðam ongytan ne mægæ, ne hys willan þær on gecnawan ne mæge? Gyf ðu ðonne cwyst þæt þu hys willan ðer on gecnawan mage, cweð þonne hweðer þe rihtra þince, þe þu hys willan folgie, þe þu folgie þam welan þe he ðe er forgeaf to eacan hys freondscype?<sup>358</sup> (Book I. ll. 13–20)

I wonder why you speak that way. Think now if your lord's letter and his seal come to you, whether you can say that you may not recognise him by that, nor may be able to understand his will therein? If then you say that you can understand his will therein, say then which of the two you think is right, that you follow his will, or that you follow the wealth he gave you to increase his friendship?

In order to explain an abstract concept, Reason turns to the material world. God is compared to an earthly lord, who has expressed his wishes in a letter. The author's addition of 'insegel,' a seal, is telling. The seal immediately identifies the lord as the sender and reinforces the authority of the ruler who sends the letter as an official order. The lord expects his will to be recognised, understood, and then to be obeyed. Indeed, the structure of Reason's question here steers Augustine to the right answer. Of course the lord (whether secular or eternal) should be obeyed. The letter is next linked to the lord's generosity, as Reason asks about the wealth the lord has given his subject. Augustine answers:

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<sup>358</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred's Version*, 23.

Me þincð betere þæt ic forlete þa gyfe and folgyge þam gyfan ðe me egðer ys stiward, ge ðæs welan ge eac hys freondscypes, buton (ic) egðer habban magæ.<sup>359</sup> (ll. 4–7)

I think that it is better that I relinquish the gift and follow the giver who is to me a steward, both of wealth and of his friendship, unless I can have both.

Having both the lord's friendship and being the recipient of his generosity would be ideal, but Augustine acknowledges that following his lord faithfully takes precedence. Moreover, a lord is not likely to be generous to a subject who does not follow his orders, and conversely a subject whose obedience goes unrewarded is less likely to remain loyal. The dialogue leaves no doubt about the right course for a king's subject to take. The king expects obedience, and as the 'stiward' of both wealth and friendship, he decides to whom he will show generosity. Friendship is, thus, important for social order. Nicole Guenther Discenza has noted that pre-Conquest social structure leans heavily on this notion of friendship and reciprocity: "The problems of good and bad kings, and of how a king and his followers should behave toward one another, run through most Old English poetry either explicitly or implicitly."<sup>360</sup> Discenza, discussing the *Boethius* in particular, concludes that the text shows no real concern with a king's power; its images of kingship are just that, images, and can be seen as anecdotal. However, I suggest that Alfred does in fact discuss and reflect on royal power—not only in the *Boethius*, and perhaps even most clearly in the *Soliloquies*. Following secular tradition, a king's power is not seen in absolute terms in the Alfredian texts, but is defined primarily through his relationships with his subjects. In other words, a king is only as powerful as his subjects allow him to be, by showing him obedience and fulfilling their functions in society. By identifying the lord as a 'stiward' of friendship in the example above, the author uses contemporary cultural conventions in order to explain the obedience God expects from his followers.

The importance of a subject's obedience to his lord is further highlighted in Book II. Once more, Augustine is persuaded by Reason to trust his lord, here used as a substitute for Christ, over anyone else. What if your lord tells you something that you did not see or hear before? Reason asks, once more in an almost rhetorical question: "Ðincð þe hweðer

<sup>359</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred's Version*, 24.

<sup>360</sup> Discenza, *The King's English*, 80.

þu awuht æt his segene tweoge, forðam þu hyt self ne gesawe?”<sup>361</sup> (Does it seem to you that you would doubt his assertion at all, because you didn’t see it yourself? ll. 29–30). As with the sealed letter, it is not for the individual to doubt his lord’s statements and commands. The worldly explanation of Augustine’s original also indicates the sense of hierarchy and order already mentioned. Indeed, during the same discussion Augustine calls God “Kyng ealra kynga” (King of all kings.)<sup>362</sup> This interpretation of God, or Christ, in terms of secular kingship connects religious hierarchy with worldly notions of leadership. Moreover, calling God the ‘king of kings’ and using worldly power as an explanation of divine power allows the translator to assert his own authority into the text, and to remind the audience of the importance of social order.

By discussing social order the translator returns to a favoured Alfredian theme. Alfredian concerns with social order and its reciprocal nature resurface in several forms. The *Soliloquies* offers many examples, which cannot all be discussed here. A couple, however, stand out. The first is introduced with Reason pointing out the importance of God’s help for every human action. He then adds:

.... and huru he myd us (wyrce) swa-swa myd sumum gewældnum tolum swa-swa hyt awriten is, þæt ælcum wel wyrceandum God myd beo mydwyrhta. We witon ðæt nan man mæg nawyht goodes wyrcean buton hym God myd wyrce; and þeah ne scal nan man beo ydel þæt he hwæthwugu ne onginne be ðam myhtum þe hym God gife.<sup>363</sup> (ll. 11–17).

...and indeed he works with us as with some powerful tool, just as it is written, that God is a fellow worker with each good labourer. We know that no man can do good works unless God works with him; however no man ought to be idle so that he does not begin something with the might that God gives him.

This passage brings to mind the discussion of the tools and materials the king needs to rule properly in the Old English *Boethius*. As before, the comparison highlights the mutual dependency between a lord (whether he is God or Alfred) and his subjects. The ruler works together with his people, each depending on the other. Reason then links this

<sup>361</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred’s Version*, 60.

<sup>362</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred’s Version*, 61.

<sup>363</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred’s Version*, 30.

to one of Alfred's recurring concerns with assuming power and responsibility. As before, he stresses that if God has given one a certain gift one has to use it. This was one of the central ideas in the *Pastoral Care*: if a person has the given ability to perform a certain role, he must do so. The *Pastoral Care* highlighted the dangers of desiring power, as this may lead to pride. Asser defended Alfred's decisions as ruler by giving reasons why he could not be guilty of pride.<sup>364</sup> In this instance, Reason rephrases this argument: if God has gifted a person with skills, it would be idle not to use them. The use of 'myhtum' underscores the importance of activity in this passage, in contrast to 'ydel.' God is presented here as an active ruler, who uses tools and materials, just like the king in the *Boethius*, and who gives power to be used effectively.<sup>365</sup> God's leadership reflects Asser's portrayal of Alfred as a king who is actively involved in the daily running of his kingdom, in matters ranging from legal cases to construction works.<sup>366</sup> In the light of the comments on royal authority so far, the addition here may well be another subtle defence of Alfred's active involvement and the exercising of authority in so many different areas. He has been given power and the right skills, and it would be wrong not to use them.

The next example is concerned with wealth, and just as the similar example from the Old English *Boethius* reads like a defence of a king's actions. In this case, a king's wealth is linked to his duties to society. After Reason has asked Augustine whether he desires wealth, Augustine answers that he does not. He then adds a further explanation:

Deah me genoh cume, ne fagnige ic hys na ful swiðe, ne hys ful ungemetlice ne bruce, ne æac maran getilige to haldænne, þonne ic gemetlice bi beon mage, and þa men on gehabban and gehealdan þe ic forðian sceal; and þæt þæt þær ofer byð ic hohgie swa ændebyrdlice gedelan swa ic ændebyrdlicost mæg (ll. 15–20).<sup>367</sup>

Although enough should come to me, it would not delight me exceedingly, nor would I spend it very immoderately, nor would I strive after more to retain than I

<sup>364</sup> As discussed in the examination of the *Pastoral Care*.

<sup>365</sup> Again, this ties in with Asser's portrayal of Alfred as a king actively involved in the running of his kingdom.

<sup>366</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 101–102.

<sup>367</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred's Version*, 35. Hargrove identifies 'ne hys ful' as the beginning of Alfred's addition.

could fittingly use, and to hold and retain the men on whom I must support; and then what shall be left afterwards I would attempt to divide as orderly as I can.

As we have seen, the *Boethius* was also concerned with wealth. The perspective, however, is slightly different; the *Boethius* links wealth more closely to generosity and fame, as the person who gives his wealth to others acquires a good name in return. In the *Soliloquies*, wealth becomes a tool for social order. The emphasis is on the duty of a good ruler to look after his people. Moreover, the translator's addition appears to defend the acquisition of wealth, stressing that the king does not obtain more than he could use. Indeed, there is a sense of anxiety in this passage, an eagerness to explain that all excess wealth would not be kept but given away. This anxiety is understandable when we take the *Pastoral Care* into consideration, and its story of Hezekiah. This king's 'goldhord' led to pride, and eventually to his downfall. As previously, the Alfredian alterations to the text demonstrate an eagerness to disassociate the king from the sin of pride.

Thirdly, the translator expands on the importance of loyalty in his additions. Ganze has highlighted the use of the word 'treowða,' which he translates as 'troth.'<sup>368</sup> Augustine says: "ac ic wilnode þæt ic cuðe hys ingeþance of minum ingeþance; ðonne wiste ic hwilce treowða he hæfde wið me."<sup>369</sup> (But I wish that I know his mind with my mind; then I knew what his loyalty was with me). The addition is the second part of the sentence, and shows concern with the loyalty of the king's subjects. Ganze, however, interprets 'treowða' as a crucial word for the theme of hierarchy and social order pervading the translation as a whole. In this passage, he sees not only a ruler's interest in his people's loyalty, but states that "it also serves to place the individual self into a system of hierarchical relationships, each requiring individuals to pledge troth to their immediate superiors, and as a result providing them with a sense of their own social identity and the social identity of others."<sup>370</sup> Unassuming as it may appear, then, 'treowða' may well be at the very heart of Alfredian thinking on royal authority. It reveals a society whose order is defined and maintained by each individual's loyalty and obedience to those above

<sup>368</sup> Ganze, "The Individual", 29. The Bosworth-Toller dictionary gives 'truth, good faith, honour' as its first meanings. The latter two especially highlight the reciprocal meaning of the word. "Treowða", Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary, accessed 07-01-2020, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/031025>

<sup>369</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred's Version*, 18–19. Within the present context I have chosen to translate *treowða* with loyalty, though Ganze's 'troth' fits too.

<sup>370</sup> Ganze, "The Individual", 29.

him.<sup>371</sup> This argument is in fact supported by Alfred's law-code, also called the *Domboc*, which I discuss below. Mary Richards' observation concerning loyalty in the law-code, however, is also relevant here. She writes that Alfred's law-code differs from Ine's not just in content but also in tone, as Alfred "enjoins his subjects to keep their oath and pledge."<sup>372</sup> Keeping in mind the importance of oaths and pledges, with their potential to cement relationships and reinforce or create social order, we can see a pervasive concern with loyalty and pledges of loyalty in Alfredian writing.

Two final examples shed more light on the king's relationship with his people. The first is the *Soliloquies*' striking analogy between a king's court and wisdom:

Ic þe mæg tecan æac oðre bysne be þam wisdom. Geðenc nu hweðer awiht mani mann cynges ham sece þer ðær he ðonne on tune byð, oððe hys gemot, oððe hys fird, oððe hweðer ðe ðince þæt hi æalle on anne weig þeder cumen? Ic wene þeah ðæt hi cumen on swiðe manige wegas: sume cumað swiðe feorran and habbað swiðe længe weig and swiðe yfelne and swiðe earforðferne; sume habbað swiðe langne and swiðe rihtne and swiðe godne; sume habbað swiðne scortne, and þeah wone and nearone and fuulne; sume habbað scordne and smeðne and rihtne, and þeah cumað æalle to anum halforde; sume æð, sume uneð, naðer ne hi þeder gelice eaðe cumað, ne hi þer gelice eaðe ne beoð. Sume beoð on maran are and on maran eðnesse ðonne sume, sume on læssan, sume ful neah buton, buton þæt an þæt he lufað. Swa hit bið æac be þam wisdom.<sup>373</sup>

I may also teach you other examples about wisdom. Think now whether many men at all look for the king's home there when he is in town, or in his assembly, or on an expedition, or if it seems to you that they all come there by the same road? I believe that they come on so many ways: some come from very far and have a very long and very bad and very difficult road; some have a very long and very straight and very good road; some have a very short and still hard and straight and dirty road; some have a short and smooth and straight one, and yet

<sup>371</sup> See also the discussion on the Boethius, specifically Alfred's insertion of the three orders of society.

<sup>372</sup> Mary P. Richards, "The Laws of Alfred and Ine", in *A Companion to Alfred the Great*, eds. Paul E. Szarmach and Nicole Guenther Discenza (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 306.

<sup>373</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred's Version*, 43–44.

all come to one lord; some with ease, some with difficulty, nor do they come there with similar ease, nor are they at similar ease. Some are in more favour and in more ease than others, some in less, some are almost without, apart from the one that he loves. Thus is it also with wisdom.

Janet Nelson has summarised the passage as follows: "... wisdom is like the king's court: all are drawn to it, though some have a harder time of getting there than others, and once there, not all get equally close to the king."<sup>374</sup> Reason's explanation is emphasised by the repetition of 'swiðe.' What makes this comparison stand out though is the fact that, rather than explaining the nature of divine rulership by analogy with an earthly king as before, here it is wisdom that is compared to a secular ruler's court. Its special character is emphasized in the text by Reason's overt opening and closing of the comparison, which stresses its self-containedness. As it is, this comparison would appear to be unrelated to wisdom as encountered so far. However, when placed alongside the discussion of wisdom in the Alfredian Group, as opposed to only the *Soliloquies*, a different picture emerges. In the Old English *Boethius*, wisdom is often used as a tool for the establishment of royal authority. In the *Soliloquies* it takes on a different role. The lord becomes a symbol of wisdom, and his people attempt to reach it. The ways in which people attain wisdom, however, vary, with some taking longer or finding the road more difficult. When it comes to views on kingship, any conclusion drawn from this passage on its own would have to be speculative. Considering the Old English text's concerns so far, however, it may be regarded in the light of the previous discussion of loyalty and dedication to one's lord. Alfred's own dedication to wisdom, and the central place it takes in the translations associated with him, is clear. It may be telling, then, that the translator chooses this analogy to explain the journey towards it. In order to attain wisdom, a person has to be dedicated and loyal, regardless of the difficult road that may lay ahead. It is the same with the king and his court: it may be difficult to reach him, and he may make demands that are difficult for his subjects to meet, but these obstacles must be overcome. The metaphorical result is wisdom, but the literal result may be less clear. Considering the traditional pre-Conquest notion of loyalty to one's lord, it is probably not far-fetched to insert something along the lines of generosity and honour. Thus, it is possible to see the

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<sup>374</sup>

Nelson, "The Political Ideas of Alfred", 148.

comparison as an expression of a ruler's expectations of his people, to strive both for wisdom and for obedience and loyalty to one's king.

The last example occurs at the very end of Book III. It is significant because it integrates the secular concern with exile into a religious one that emphasises hope and the opportunity for the exile to return to his lord.

Swa-swa sum rice man on þisse weorulde hym habbe hys deorlinga sumne fram adrifēn, oððe heora begra unwyllum hym si fram anyd, and hæbbe ðonne monige wite and mani ungelimp on hys wrecsiðe, and (he) cume þeah to þam ylcan hlaforde þe he ær myd wes, and si þær micle arlicor þonne he ær wæs. Þonne gemynð he þa ungelimp þe (he) her hæfde on hys wrecsiðe, and ne byð þeah na þe unbliðre.<sup>375</sup>

Likewise, some powerful man in this world may have driven one of his favourites away from him, or may have been forced from him against both of their wishes, and have then many torments and many misfortunes in his exile, and nevertheless he comes to the same lord who he was with previously, and is there just as honourable as he was before. Then he remembers the misfortunes he had during his exile, and yet is not sadder.

At first, the comparison does not appear to fit perfectly within the context of the argument Reason is expounding at this point. Its setting at the end of the book may offer a clue to its relevance. Nearing the end of the final book, the translator may be using this comparison to reflect on the themes he has highlighted so far. While this motive is speculative, of course, the passage does shed more light on the king-retainer relationship. It takes a pre-Conquest secular theme, the retainer in exile, but crucially adds a happy ending, placing it firmly into a Christian framework. The fate of the previously happy retainer who for some reason is exiled occurs throughout Old English poetry, and is an important theme for the poems in the Exeter Book.<sup>376</sup> In this passage, the theme undergoes a remarkable change: the retainer not only returns to his lord, but also recovers his position, and is not sad when remembering his previous hardships. It is here, at the very

<sup>375</sup> Hargrove, *King Alfred's Version*, 69.

<sup>376</sup> See, for instance, the *Wanderer* and *Deor*.



end of the Alfredian version of the *Soliloquies*, that we may perhaps see most clearly how secular traditions and Christian ideals are integrated. Whereas the traditional exiled English retainer appears to live out his life in wretched solitude, in this instance the retainer is reinstated to his former position. It is difficult not to read a Christian message of hope here. An exile can be returned to his lord. In the Alfredian vision of kingship, the relationship between a lord and his people is mendable.

#### 2.4.4. Conclusion

The Old English *Soliloquies* shows a profound concern with the relationship between a lord and his people. The preface continues to position the king as a teacher, and foreshadows the translation's attempt to integrate the reality of being a secular ruler in ninth-century England within a larger Christian framework. This can be seen in the translation's many additions, especially the comparisons, which aim to explain Augustine's somewhat abstract arguments about the spiritual self and God through the use of the material world. Augustine's inward-looking text becomes more outward looking: the self in the Alfredian version is one who, following precedent, determines his position in society based on his relationships to others. Specifically, the relationship between a king and his people should be one based on reciprocity, which is a theme throughout the Alfredian Group. In its most simple and ideal form, subjects give the king their loyalty, and in return the king shows his generosity. In this way, social hierarchy is maintained. This model can then be integrated without too many issues into the Christian framework, by use of comparisons. God is the 'king of all kings,' and will also reward his followers generously in return for their loyalty. In the *Soliloquies*, however, things are not this straightforward. The text hints repeatedly at concerns that the reciprocity may not be maintained. While the preface may be gentle in tone in its phrasing of the king's expectations, the translation is more straightforward: the king expects obedience and loyalty. Moreover, the additions demonstrate a continuation of the Alfredian defence of royal authority. Considering the renewed trouble with Scandinavian raiders at the likely time of translation, and the potential hazardous succession after Alfred's death,<sup>377</sup> it is not

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<sup>377</sup> Alfred had succeeded his older brother Æthelred to the exclusion of the latter's two young sons. As Janet Nelson has noted, Alfred took steps to ensure the crown passed to his son Edward and afterwards to his grandson, Æthelstan. Nelson, "The Political Ideas of Alfred", 147–148. Nonetheless, Edward still had to fight his cousin, Æthelwold, for the crown, until Æthelwold's death in 903.

surprising that authors were concerned with royal authority, and that they felt the need to defend the king's decisions. Alfred's acquisition of wealth seems to have been a topic of special interest, which the translator states is not done for the king himself but only for society's greater good. In doing so, he aims to demonstrate that the king fulfills his side of the pledge, namely to be generous.

The translator ends the *Soliloquies* on a positive note. The final example discussed shows the ideal integration of secular traditions and religious ideals. It demonstrates that, even though a person may become detached from his king or God, it need not be the irreversible and tragic end that it often is in Old English poetry, such as *Deor*. Indeed, a person may not only return after his exile, but also retake his former position in the hierarchy and in his lord's community. The translation thus ends on a note of reconciliation and forgiveness. The heroic past finds continuity within a Christian framework that reinforces Alfred's royal authority by using it to explain God's nature and expectations.

## 2.5. The law-code

### 2.5.1. Introduction

Alfred's law-code provides significant insights into Alfredian thinking on kingship. Dated to c. 895,<sup>378</sup> towards the end of Alfred's reign, it expresses concerns that align it with the texts discussed so far in this chapter. As such, rather than being merely a legal text that stands in isolation, it is strongly connected with the core texts of the reform programme through its concerns with royal authority and social order. In later medieval texts it is often referred to as 'seo domboc,' and the fact that it was still in use in the tenth century, and was still read in the fourteenth century,<sup>379</sup> suggests that "Alfred's successors were conscious of its cardinal importance in the establishment of social order."<sup>380</sup> This idea is borne out by its manuscript context. Mary Richards, commenting on the combined law-codes of Alfred and Ine, has highlighted that the text survives in "multiple copies

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<sup>378</sup> Richards, "The Laws of Alfred and Ine", 282.

<sup>379</sup> Richards, "The Laws of Alfred and Ine", 291.

<sup>380</sup> Simon Keynes, "England, c. 900–1016", *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. Timothy Reuter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 471.

dating from the mid-tenth through the early twelfth century, a greater number than any other Anglo-Saxon law code.”<sup>381</sup>

As I have argued, social order is an important theme in Alfredian writing, and it is of central importance to the law-code. Asser’s biography underscores the interest the king himself took in legal matters, as noted previously.<sup>382</sup> Alfred, however, was not the first king to take on an active role in his kingdom’s legislation. Indeed, Alfred’s code cannot be seen outside its historical legal context, as it not only went on to inform later legislation, but was itself also based on earlier legislation, such as Ine’s, which was appended to Alfred’s code. The idea that a relation exists between legislation and the authority of kings is not new. H.R. Loyn, for instance, has stated that law codes give insight into the basics of early English kingship,<sup>383</sup> and more specifically Richard Abels has seen in Alfred’s code a “public display of his regality.”<sup>384</sup> Interestingly, in her discussion of Cnut’s law codes, Pauline Stafford has stated that the interest in the correlation between kingship and law followed the monastic revival in the tenth century, and is mainly associated with Wulfstan.<sup>385</sup> While she acknowledges the importance of the earlier codes for those of Cnut, I will argue that Alfred’s code demonstrates an interest in the interaction between legislation and royal authority which predates Wulfstan by at least a hundred years.<sup>386</sup> This interest is of a practical rather than a theoretical nature, as it is centred on aspects such as the unification of the ‘English’<sup>387</sup> and the importance of loyalty, and must be seen in the light of the challenges facing Alfred at the end of his reign.

The (legal) authority in the code is used to promote secular traditions (a legal tradition, in this case) and to frame it into a religious narrative, and consists of three distinctive parts. The prologue’s concern with Christian legal precedent places Alfred’s own code in alignment with religious authority, with Alfred as the legislative successor

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<sup>381</sup> Richards, “The Laws of Alfred and Ine”, 283.

<sup>382</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 109.

<sup>383</sup> H.R. Loyn, *The governance of Anglo-Saxon England 500–1087* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), 4.

<sup>384</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 247.

<sup>385</sup> Pauline Stafford, “The Laws of Cnut and the History of Anglo-Saxon Royal Promises”, *Anglo-Saxon England* 10 (1982 for 1981): 173.

<sup>386</sup> Which is not to deny, of course, that Cnut’s law codes, written by Wulfstan, were not distinctive and did not expand on the earlier laws.

<sup>387</sup> See on the contemporary meaning and usage of this term vs its modern application: Susan Reynolds, “What Do We Mean”, 395–414.

to Moses and Christ. The preface, on the other hand, addresses the secular past, and examines authority from the perspective of a secular ruler. The code itself, thus positioned as a successor to both Christian and secular legal traditions, is concerned with the relationship between subject and lord which, through loyalty, provides the kingdom with unity and stability. In other words, while the code is presented as carrying both religious and secular authority, its additions present ideas of royal authority that reflect ninth-century political reality. Rather than an impassive, fixed, text, Alfred's code demonstrates legislation's versatility and adaptability.

Before I begin my discussion of the prologue, it should be noted that any consideration of ideas in a medieval text is frustrated by the knowledge that much more is likely to have been lost than has survived. In the case of the law-code this issue is complicated further by the early medieval reliance on customary and oral law, as Simon Keynes has stated.<sup>388</sup> Thus, any law that appears to be 'original' may in fact be based on a lost piece of legislation, or may be based on an unwritten tradition.<sup>389</sup> A law's indebtedness to earlier legislation can never be ruled out satisfactorily. Nonetheless, Alfred's law-code displays several features that are idiosyncratic. Even if Alfred and his writers did not invent them all, they collected them in a legislative text that shows affinity with the themes present in other Alfredian writing, and which can thus be argued to be part of a wider concern with secular power.

### 2.5.2. The Prologue<sup>390</sup>

In the introduction to his *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, first published in 1922, F.L. Attenborough, after giving a brief summary of the prologue's contents, writes that "The introduction down to this point has been omitted as having no bearing on Anglo-Saxon law."<sup>391</sup> He then continues to stress the importance of the following passage, which I will refer to as the preface, for Alfred's references to his legislating royal

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<sup>388</sup> Keynes, "England", 471.

<sup>389</sup> I will touch upon the likely influence of oral legal traditions later.

<sup>390</sup> I am following Michael Treschow here in referring to this passage as the 'prologue' rather than, for instance, Attenborough's labelling it as the 'introduction,' as this latter term is used for both the prologue and the preface (which are, as I will show, very distinct) whilst also undermining their respective roles in the code as a whole. Michael Treschow, "The Prologue to Alfred's Law Code: Instruction in the Spirit of Mercy", *Florilegium* 13 (1994).

<sup>391</sup> F. L. Attenborough, ed., *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 35.

predecessors.<sup>392</sup> Attenborough's rejection of the prologue is understandable when the code is read in a linear tradition of law-making, which appears to be his personal perspective; indeed, he acknowledges that Ine's code is an appendix to Alfred's in all extant manuscripts, but curiously begins his own edition with the former rather than the latter.<sup>393</sup> The prologue's concern with biblical, more specifically Mosaic, law, is arguably the reason why it has received relatively little attention. The idea, it appears, is that secular and biblical law, and ninth-century interpretations of these laws, are mutually exclusive. More recently, however, the importance of the prologue for our interpretation of the law code has been recognised, for instance by Michael Treschow, who has stated that when "we look back to this law-code's prologue we meet something at once traditional and yet utterly distinctive."<sup>394</sup> This statement is one that could arguably apply to most, if not all, texts associated with Alfred, especially the law-code itself. Moreover, the fact that all manuscripts list the prologue as the first item in their table of contents points to its being a significant component.<sup>395</sup> Thus, the prologue should be seen in conjunction with the preface and the code itself, as a significant component of a text concerned with the king's authority. In its concern with biblical law, the prologue shows an ambition for the code as a whole to be regarded not just in a secular, but also in a Christian legal tradition. Through looking back to biblical law in a chronological manner Alfred asserts his own royal authority, as he positions himself as the successor to Moses and Christ in having the power to provide his people with legislation.

The prologue takes up a substantial part of the 'domboc,' and as such it is unfortunately impossible within the scope of this chapter to discuss it in its entirety. Instead, I will consider three examples that stand out due to their relevance for the code as a whole. First of all, the prologue's opening words, which consciously position it in a biblical legal tradition:

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<sup>392</sup> In order to highlight the differences in aims between these passages, as relevant for my argument, I have chosen to follow Treschow in distinguishing between the Prologue and the Preface.

<sup>393</sup> Attenborough, *Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, 35.

<sup>394</sup> Treschow, "Prologue", 80.

<sup>395</sup> Treschow, "Prologue", 81.

Dryhten wæs sprecende ðas word to Moyse, 7 þus cwæð: Ic eom dryhten ðin God. Ic ðe utgelædde of Egipta londe 7 of hiora ðeowdome.<sup>396</sup>

The Lord was speaking these words to Moses and spoke as follows: I am the Lord your God. I have led you out of the land of the Egyptians, and their slavery.

While the text mostly follows Exodus 20:1 here,<sup>397</sup> the opening choice leaves no doubt as to the Christian context in which the code needs to be interpreted. The very first word, ‘Dryhten,’ reminds the reader that the ultimate authority is God’s, and also foreshadows the text’s concern with authority more generally. The prologue then continues to be occupied with Mosaic law, taken from Exodus, and concludes with a statement that allocates the preceding laws a position on the continuum and creates a link with Christ:

Dis sindan ða domas þe se ælmihtega God self sprecende wæs to Moyse 7 him bebead to healdanne; 7 siððan se ancenneda Dryhtnes sunu, uru God, þæt is hælend Crist, on middangeard cwom, he cwæð ðæt he ne come no ðas bebodu to breccanne ne to forbeadanne, ac mid eallum godum to ecanne; 7 mildheortnesse 7 eaðmodness he lærde (49).<sup>398</sup>

These are the laws that almighty God himself was speaking to Moses, and commanded him to keep; and afterwards the only-begotten son of God our lord, that is our saviour Christ, came to earth, he said that he did not come to break or forbid these commands, but to increase them with all that is good, and he taught mercy and humility.

Treschow rightly remarks on the use of ‘siððan’ here, which “sets up a temporal sequence,” and “puts the passage into an historical relation with Christ who succeeds the

<sup>396</sup> Old English quotations are from the E manuscript as given in *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen, volume 1: Text und Übersetzung*, ed. and trans. Felix Liebermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Here: p. 26.

<sup>397</sup> As noted by Treschow, “Prologue”, 82.

<sup>398</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 42.

authority of Mosaic law and begins a new era.”<sup>399</sup> The passage, however, does more than place Moses’ and Christ’s law in historical context and create a link between the two law-givers. A view of the prologue as an integral part of the law code yields a further connection, namely with Alfred himself. By establishing Moses as the proponent of Old Testament law and Christ as the proponent of New Testament Law, the author paves the way for Alfred’s own code to be interpreted as their successor. Moreover, Alfred’s law-giving predecessors are used here to indicate the biblical legal precedent to his own approach, and aligns his practice with that of Christ. Whereas Moses, as in the first example above, took his laws directly from God, the prologue highlights that Christ added to the already existing laws without disrespecting them —which, the passage implies, would be a denial of God’s authority, as the laws came from God through Moses. This can be read as both a foreshadowing of Alfred’s own approach to law-giving in the code and as a defence of the alterations he has made in his translation of the Mosaic laws — alterations which, as with previous Alfredian translations, result in a text that is more compatible with ninth-century practicalities.<sup>400</sup> In other words, the prologue presents the reader with a genealogy of Christian law making that leads the reader from God to Moses, from Moses to Christ, and from Christ to Alfred.

Finally, the prologue also shows an interest in loyalty that resurfaces in the law-code itself. The idea that the relationship between a lord and his subjects is vital is expressed towards the end of the prologue. The ideal of mercy, so far presented as of the utmost importance in Christian legal matters, has to concede to one exception in this context, namely when a person plots against his king.

buton æt hlafordearwe hie nane mildheortnesse ne dorston gecweðan, forþam ðe God ælmihtig þam nane ne gedemde þe hine oferhogdon, ne Crist Godes sunu, þam nane ne gedemde þe hine to deaðe sealde, 7 he bebead þone hlaford lufian swa hine (49.7)<sup>401</sup>

Apart from cases of treason against a lord, for which they didn’t dare to pronounce any mercy, because God almighty ordained none to those who scorn

<sup>399</sup> Treschow, “Prologue”, 86.

<sup>400</sup> For an extensive overview of these alterations see Treschow, “Prologue”.

<sup>401</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 46.

him. Nor did Christ, God's son, grant it to any who betrayed him to death, and he commanded each to love his lord as he loves himself.

Once more a secular lord is associated with God and Christ. Mercy takes a central place in biblical law, but an attack against the king is one of the few laws in the text that carries the death penalty.<sup>402</sup> The seriousness of the offence is highlighted by its comparison with treason against God and Christ; if they could not bestow mercy for such an act, then it cannot be expected from a secular king either. The ramifications of treason go beyond the realm of religion. Indeed, "treachery betrays the bond of love by which the state subsists."<sup>403</sup> It therefore damages not only the individual bond between a lord and his subject, but by its negation of the lord's authority and sacral kingship also undermines the order and balance needed to ensure the peace and security of the kingdom as a whole. Mercy cannot be granted if social order is at risk. The final sentence reaffirms the importance of the relationship between a lord and his people in a positive way, and reminds the reader that it is ultimately founded on love and loyalty. Christ's command is presented here as part of the legislation and is reminiscent of Asser's insistence on illustrating both desirable and undesirable behaviour, so that one may learn from them.<sup>404</sup>

Treschow's statement that "this prologue makes no claim on behalf of Alfred's authority"<sup>405</sup> may be partly correct, as it does not make any specific claim, nor is Alfred's name mentioned, as it will be in the preface. However, the prologue establishes an alignment between biblical and secular lawgiving, the consequences of which can be felt throughout the rest of the text. This sequence presents Alfred as the successor in lawgiving to God (via Moses) and Christ. His authority stems from this ability. Like Christ, he will add to the laws whilst respecting the existing laws (which he demonstrates in his alterations to Mosaic law and in the preface), and like Christ he will show mercy, except in those cases that undermine his authority and are a potential risk to the kingdom's security. The prologue should, therefore, be viewed as a meaningful component of the text as a whole, as it presents the Christian framework through which the rest of the text needs to be interpreted. Its preoccupation with authority and loyalty finds continuation in the following preface and code.

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<sup>402</sup> Pratt, *Political Thought*, 233.

<sup>403</sup> Treschow, "Prologue", 106.

<sup>404</sup> Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 20.

<sup>405</sup> Treschow, "Prologue", 83.



### 2.5.3. The Preface

The preface is set apart from the prologue by a complete change of direction, opening with the words ‘Ic ða Ælfred cyning’ (Then I King Alfred). Switching to a first-person speaker, ‘ic,’ who self-identifies as Alfred, the voice of the text is modified, just as the following word ‘ða’ signals a temporal change, from a biblical past to the ninth-century present. Those first few words thus underscore the importance of the law code as a secular text with a secular history. Rather than relying on biblical authority, Alfred now turns to his secular royal predecessors, using their laws and their fame in support of his own authority. This fact, however, obscures the innovation that characterises the text, as Alfred emphasises unity not just in Wessex, but of the ‘English.’

The preface shows similarities with those belonging to the Alfredian Group, such as the preface to the *Pastoral Care*, in that Alfred sets out his reasoning behind the processes involved in the writing down of the text:

Ic ða Ælfred cyning þas togædere gegaderode, 7 awritan het, monege þara þe ure foregengan heoldon, ða ðe me licodon; 7 manege þara þe me ne licodon ic awarep mid minra witena geðeahte, 7 on oðre wisan bebead to healdanne. Forðam ic ne dorste geðristlæcam þara minra awuht fela on gewrit settan, forðam me wæs uncuð, hwæt þæs ðam lician wolde ðe æfter us wæren; ac ða ðe ic gemette awðer oððe on Ines dæge, mines mæges, oððe on Offan Mercna cyninges, oððe on Æþelbryhtes, þe ærest fulluhte onfeng on angelcynne, þa ðe me ryhtoste ðuhton, ic þa heron gegaderode, 7 þa oðre forlet (49.9).<sup>406</sup>

Afterwards I King Alfred gathered these together, and ordered them to be written down, many of those which were kept by our predecessors, when they pleased me; and I rejected many of those that did not please me, with my counsellors’ advice, and ordered (them) to be kept in different ways. Because I did not dare to presume to put at all many of my own in writing, for it was unknown to me what would please those who come after us; but those that I found either in the day of Ine, my kinsman, or of Offa, King of Mercia, or of

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<sup>406</sup>

Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 46.

Æthelberht, who was the first to receive baptism in England, that seemed most just to me, I have gathered here, and the others I omitted.

Alfred's preoccupation with the careful and critical collection of his predecessor's laws brings to mind the gathering of wood in the preface to the *Soliloquies*.<sup>407</sup> As Patrick Wormald has pointed out, however, Alfred's claim that he collected and scrutinised earlier laws is a topos, and we must therefore be wary of its potential to comment on royal power.<sup>408</sup> Nonetheless, it must be noted that it is a Carolingian topos, not an English one (Ine, whilst referring to his collaboration with others in setting down his laws, does not mention any consideration of earlier laws), and as such does provide a clue to the wider influence and tradition Alfred is eager to follow.

The preface accordingly presents itself as traditional but also reflects its own remarks on the laws in adapting and expanding the prefaces of its precursors. Ine's shorter preface mentions specific men who helped him create these laws, but does not specify anyone but those particular people closest to him at that particular time —two bishops, Eorcenwald and Hædde, and his father Cenred. Alfred, on the other hand, crosses both geographical and temporal boundaries in order to assert his authority as lawgiver. Most conspicuous is the fact that, rather than mentioning the names of those who assisted him, Alfred names the past kings whose laws he consulted.<sup>409</sup> Ine, king of Wessex from the late seventh to the early eighth century, was a distant relative and, considering that his laws were appended to those of Alfred, an important component in the establishment of Alfred's legal authority.<sup>410</sup> Ine's inclusion is therefore understandable, but Alfred looks beyond the borders of Wessex to include Offa, the late eighth-century king of Mercia,

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<sup>407</sup> Susan Irvine has made a connection here with the tale of Hercules and the Hydra as added to the Old English *Boethius*. Here, Hercules demonstrates skill and cleverness by first surrounding the Hydra with wood. Irvine notes that, considering the links between Alfred and Hercules established in the text, it is "tempting" to connect this passage to the gathering of wood here in the preface to the *Soliloquies*. Susan Irvine, "Wrestling with Hercules: King Alfred and the Classical Past", in *Court Culture in the Early Middle Ages: The Proceedings of the First Alcuin Conference*, ed. Catherine Cubitt (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 175–176.

<sup>408</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1, 277–278; *Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 277–278.

<sup>409</sup> I will return to the absence of specific names later in this chapter.

<sup>410</sup> The fact that Ine, unlike many of his successors, had enjoyed a relatively long reign and appears to have died of natural causes after he had abdicated and travelled to Rome, may also have been significant factor for his inclusion here.

and Æthelberht, the late sixth/early seventh-century king of Kent. Offa was known for expanding his kingdom considerably, but it is Æthelberht whose inclusion here is perhaps most noteworthy. Rather than merely identifying him as king of a specific area, as he does with Ine (by way of claiming his kinship) and Offa, Alfred adds that Æthelberht was the first to receive baptism in the ‘angelcynn.’<sup>411</sup> It is this statement that provides a clue to one of the code’s major aims, namely the promotion of a sense of English unity. This unity hinges on the combination of ‘angelcynn,’ implying a shared ancestry, and a shared Christianity through Æthelberht’s baptism and the role of biblical law in the prologue. As Mary Richards has noted, the code itself then becomes a symbol of the unification of the West-Saxons, Mercians, and Kentish. Their laws were unified and traditional, and could thus be used by the king to claim authority over all.<sup>412</sup>

However, Alfred’s assertion of his royal authority hinges not only on the jurisdiction of his predecessors. Indeed, similar to the preface to the *Pastoral Care*, Alfred assumes religious authority here. He does so through omission of any reference to ecclesiastical weight behind the laws, and by not giving any names in particular—other than those of his predecessors, as we have seen. Consideration of Ine’s preface demonstrates these differences clearly. Ine specifies that his laws have come into being ‘mid geðeahte 7 mid lare’<sup>413</sup> (with the advice and with the instruction) of his father Cenred and “Heddes mines biscepes 7 Eorcenwodes mines biscepes, mid eallum minum ealdormommum, 7 þæm ieldstan witum minre ðeode 7 eac micelre gesomnunge Godes ðeowa”<sup>414</sup> (Hedde my bishop and Eorcenwold my bishop, and with all of my ealdormen and the oldest wise men of my people and also with many servants of God’s congregation). Ine not only identifies specific bishops here, Hedde and Eorcenwold, the only people named apart from his father Cenred, but also alludes to the presence of a larger ecclesiastical community whose advice and approval of the laws he had managed to secure. Such references to a religious presence behind the laws is entirely absent from

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<sup>411</sup> The importance of St Augustine’s mission, sent by Gregory, to Alfredian writers is underscored by the verse preface to the *Pastoral Care*, which opens with Augustine taking Gregory’s *Cura Pastoralis* (used as a symbol of Christianity) to England, and presumably to the court of Æthelberht.

<sup>412</sup> Mary P. Richards, “Anglo-Saxonism in Old English Laws”, in *Anglo-Saxonism and the Construction of Social Identity*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen and John D. Niles (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1997), 43–44.

<sup>413</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 88.

<sup>414</sup> Attenborough, *Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, 35.

Alfred's text, which only refers vaguely to counsellors. This attitude may well reflect Alfred's at times troubled relationship with the clergy, and his attempts to assert his authority over them.<sup>415</sup> Furthermore, by not naming specific people Alfred is able to draw further attention to himself as the central force behind the laws. He self-names twice, and the only individuals mentioned specifically by name are his predecessors, whose laws influenced his own. Those he does mention were all kings and, crucially, were all dead—they could not pose any threat to his own authority. His counsellors are acknowledged but we are not told who they were, which means that Alfred is and remains the central figure behind the legislation.

A further sense of continuity stems from the very act of writing down the laws. The emphasis on the text's status as a written document ('awritan het' and 'on gewrit settan') suggests the code's position on a continuum. This idea is reinforced by Alfred's assertion that he has considered the wishes of those coming 'æfter us.' The law-code is presented as a living document, one that has been adapted to suit the ninth-century reality of Alfred's realm, but will also suit those in later times.<sup>416</sup> The importance of writing down laws was asserted by Hincmar of Rheims, and Carolingian influence may be seen throughout the code.<sup>417</sup> Indeed, according to Patrick Wormald, what mattered was not so much the structure and nature of the laws, but the fact that they were put in writing.<sup>418</sup> Committing laws to vellum allows them to live on. The words 'æfter us' should be seen

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<sup>415</sup> See, for instance, Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 244–245 for Alfred's reputation at some religious houses for tyranny. Cf. again the discussion above on the *Pastoral Care*, and his assumption of authority over ecclesiastics by positioning himself as their teacher. Also cf. Janet Nelson, who points out that Alfred had relatively few bishops and they are hardly ever mentioned. Alfred here departs from the Carolingian example in attempting to sever the strong links between secular and religious power. Nelson, "Political Ideas", 147–148.

<sup>416</sup> Cf. Treschow's remarks in response to Mary P. Richards' argument for the code as a 'timeless'. It should, he states rather be seen as a 'timely' text, one that incorporates the past whilst still being relevant. Treschow, "Prologue", 83.

<sup>417</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 424–425. Wormald also discusses the preface's similarities with Fulk's letter to Alfred upon his sending of Grimbald to Alfred's court. As Fulk was Hincmar's successor as archbishop of Rheims, it is certainly possible that Alfred was familiar with Hincmar's writing. Also cf. with Nelson: "For Hincmar as for Augustine, an essential component of the royal office was the making and preservation of law, new royal laws being created to conserve the public rights and interests enshrined in existing laws. Herein lay the king's claim on his subjects' obedience." Janet Nelson, "Kingship, Law and Liturgy in the Political Thought of Hincmar of Rheims", *The English Historical Review* 363 (April 1977): 242.

<sup>418</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 427.

in the light of similar sentiments expressed in the Alfredian Group. As discussed previously, Alfred's prefaces do not just look to the past, but actively seek to prepare for the kingdom's future. Asser's characterisation of Alfred as a king interested in building does not just carry a literal meaning. In his roles as teacher, pastoral carer, and here legislator, Alfred is building knowledge and a societal structure for his people that, hopefully, will stand the test of time. As the preface to the *Soliloquies* is concerned with using materials from the past to help those in the present and to build the realm's future, so the preface here shows that what Alfred offers his people is not just a law-code to be used during his reign, but one that will provide structure for the future by giving it a firm foundation in the law-codes of the past and setting it down in writing. The fact that at least one of the manuscripts that contains the code is post-Conquest and thus "reflects Norman interest in the Anglo-Saxon legal tradition,"<sup>419</sup> may be seen as an indication that the code did indeed fulfill its envisaged role as an influential and dynamic document.

The final sentence of the preface provides a suitable ending, reminding the reader of its beginning. However, it also poses a problem for the argument of unity discussed above.

Ic ða, Ælfred Westseaxna cyning eallum minum witum þas geeowde, 7 hie ða cwædon, þæt him þæt licode eallum to healdanne (49.10).<sup>420</sup>

Then I, Alfred King of the West-Saxons, showed these to all my counsellors, and they then said that it pleased them to keep them all.

Alfred self-identifies for the second time, and states once more that his counsellors' opinions had been sought, and that in the end all were in agreement. This reads as a satisfactory conclusion to the preface, as it suggests unity and general approval of the laws that follow. The problem lies in Alfred's title of 'King of the West-Saxons.' This does not seem to fit well with the tone of the first part of the preface, where he takes care to construct a sense of unity and a claim of authority over the 'angelcynn,' in any case those in Kent and Mercia, and not just the West-Saxons. Why would he now reduce his authority and only claim to be king of the West-Saxons?

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<sup>419</sup> Richards, "The Laws of Alfred and Ine", 289.

<sup>420</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 46.

Richards does not discuss the issue further when she states that Alfred mentions his kingship twice, while indeed she does mention the code's aim to unify the English.<sup>421</sup> Wormald does address the problem, stating that Alfred calls himself King of the West-Saxons because he did not want to "seem innovative."<sup>422</sup> Not wishing to be innovative is an unsatisfactory explanation in the light of the originality the text demonstrates. A possible reading could be that Alfred once more takes care not to seem too proud. Unfortunately, this theory cannot, at the moment at least, become anything more than a vague possibility. It does not sit well with Alfred's drawing attention to Kent and Mercia and the inclusion of their laws in his own. Moreover, the return of the Vikings in the late ninth century would have made an alliance and unity more than desirable.<sup>423</sup> Thus, while no suitable explanation may be offered here, ascribing Alfred's self-identification as King of the West-Saxons to a deliberate move away from innovativeness is at odds with the code's character.

The preface is positioned, both structurally and chronologically (as it moves away from Biblical law to ninth-century law) between prologue and the code itself. Its concern with secular legal traditions is founded not just on West-Saxon practice, but also emphasises the involvement of Mercia and Kent, in an attempt to promote the unity of the 'angelcynn.' Alfred's self-identification immediately at the beginning of the passage foreshadows its further similarities with other prefaces of the Alfredian Group, in setting out a vision and the processes that led to the production of the text. The preface shows the law-code to be part of a continuum; it was informed by the past and compiled with an awareness of future generations. By being both traditional, in using the law-codes of his predecessors, and original, by adapting them to ninth-century needs, Alfred does what authors and translators also did in the Alfredian Group: adapting and reinterpreting texts so that they become useful for the society and the image of kingship that he envisages. Whilst naming himself 'King of the West-Saxons' is problematic, the image of agreement and unity presented in the preface leads to a law-code that asserts Alfred's authority as ruler and legislator.

#### 2.5.4. The Law-Code

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<sup>421</sup> Richards, "The Laws of Alfred and Ine", 281 and 300.

<sup>422</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 281. Ine called himself 'Wesseaxna kyning.'

<sup>423</sup> For the situation of the 890s, see Abels, *Alfred the Great*, chapter 9.

The law-code fulfills the expectations raised by the prologue and the preface, in that it follows a conventional structure and also incorporates new features. Very detailed new legislation was likely a response to specific, individual, cases.<sup>424</sup> However, this also again raises the question of the code's ultimate purpose. Patrick Wormald has warned that, at this time, legislation did not equal law-making, and that the code should be seen as a form of propaganda.<sup>425</sup> Michael Treschow, on the other hand, has objected that the code does not make enough impression to be regarded as propaganda, and brings in further recent scholarship to argue that Alfred followed medieval convention by not distinguishing his code from those of his predecessors. He states that the laws aimed to offer guidance to magistrates, and that this is why it does not "supersede previous law codes, but rather joined with them." He concludes that "this would explain Alfred's unexceptional effort. It had no basis upon which to make any new departure or offer anything peculiar or distinctive."<sup>426</sup> It seems, then, that so far scholarship has interpreted the code in one of two, mutually exclusive, lights; one sees the code as essentially Alfredian propaganda, not so much intended as a legal text but rather one that merely aims to assert Alfred's authority, whilst the other views the code as part of a continuum, part of legal tradition that aims to guide magistrates. Whilst I agree that the code was likely intended to provide guidance, and thus would indeed have had legislative power, I find Treschow's characterisation of the code as indistinctive to be unconvincing. At the same time, there is no denying that the code does follow conventions and is, at its core, a traditional text. I propose that these two positions are not as conflicting as they appear. Rather than seeing the text as either 'traditional,' and thus impersonal, or 'innovative,' with a degree of propaganda and little serious law-making, characterising it as 'versatile' may be more accurate. The discussion of the prologue and preface above has highlighted these passages' novelty in using traditional elements to promote a sense of unity. The code itself continues this theme on a more concrete level too. Alfred uses traditional language and structure, but makes changes that bring the laws more in line both with Carolingian legal practice and with his own concerns for his kingdom, most notably centred on the importance of loyalty. Thus, the code's character shares many similarities with the

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<sup>424</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 282.

<sup>425</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 284.

<sup>426</sup> Treschow, "Prologue", 80.

Alfredian Group, in unifying traditional customs with the demands and needs of a ninth-century kingdom.

The code follows established conventions primarily in its structure and language. Indeed, Mary Richards regards the fact that the code was written in Old English, rather than Latin, as one of two features expressing English culture.<sup>427</sup> Together with Ine's laws in the appendix, also in Old English, the code does not just provide legal continuity, but also linguistic continuity. Choosing English as the language for the laws "enabled the preservation of Germanic legal traditions that preceded the conversion,"<sup>428</sup> as Richards argues that language use in the laws is consistent with oral law.<sup>429</sup> One linguistic feature stands out in this respect, namely the 'gif' structure. 'Gif' can be found at the start of many of the laws, for instance:

Gif mon cierliscne mon gebinde unsynnigne, gebete mid x scill. (35).<sup>430</sup>

If anyone binds an innocent commoner, he makes reparation with 10 shillings.

The law starts with an 'if' clause, which is followed by a corresponding punishment. This structure is not only often repeated in Alfred's code, but also in Ine's and Æthelberht's. Alfred thus follows the conventions set by his predecessors. This in itself is an act of authority, a demonstration of continuity with two great kings from the past. Moreover, the Old English codes' employment of the first person, not just in their prologues, is a unique feature that is absent from continental laws written in Latin.<sup>431</sup> Ine's first law, for instance, reads as follows:

Ærest we bebeodað, þætte Godes ðeowas hiora ryhtregol [gyman 7] on ryht healdan. Æfter þam we bebeodað þætte ealles folces æw 7 domas ðus sien gehealdene (1).<sup>432</sup>

<sup>427</sup> Richards, "Anglo-Saxonism", 40. The other feature is Christianity, which finds expression mainly in the Prologue, as discussed.

<sup>428</sup> Richards, "Anglo-Saxonism", 40.

<sup>429</sup> Richards, "Anglo-Saxonism", 43.

<sup>430</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 68.

<sup>431</sup> Richards, "Anglo-Saxonism", 43.

<sup>432</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 88.



First, we command that God's servants observe, and keep correctly, their proper rule. After this we command that the laws and judgments of all the people are kept as follows.

Mary Richards has argued convincingly for these first-person phrases to be seen as formulas "conveying the authority of oral pronouncements within the formal written codes."<sup>433</sup> The choice of language, formulas in particular and English in general, she suggests, provided a sense of continuity with the past, while being adaptable for future use. Alfred, too, uses the first-person plural in his first law. In this case, however, it immediately signals how he uses this adaptability for his own ends. Alfred states that:

Æt ærestan we lærað, þæt mæst ðearf is, þæt æghwælc mon his að 7 his wed wærlice healde (1).<sup>434</sup>

Firstly we teach that which is most necessary: that every man keeps his oath and his pledge wisely.

Alfred maintains the customary structure and first-person plural, but he changes his own role in the code's production with the first phrase, which is strongly reminiscent of his insistence in the preface to the *Pastoral Care* on translating those texts most necessary to know. Furthermore, the use of 'lærað' is significant. It is, as Andrew Rabin has noted, the word's only occurrence in this context in the code, and it highlights Alfred's self-prescribed role as teacher. This then makes magistrates, and by extension subjects, into his students, which affirms Alfred's authority and defines more clearly the king's relationship with his subjects. As a result, it draws the laws closer to the other works in the Alfredian Group, as being part of the same ideological output. Alfred's further use of the first-person plural emphasises his particular use of the structure. Rather than the more usual 'we bebeodað' and 'we cwædon,' again linking the written to the spoken word,

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<sup>433</sup> Richards, "Anglo-Saxonism", 43.

<sup>434</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 46.

Alfred also uses we ‘settað.’<sup>435</sup> ‘Settan’ can be translated in various ways, such as ‘to set, to place, or to put,’<sup>436</sup> but whichever translation is used it seems to indicate a shift from an oral use to one that is aware of the text’s written status. It would be interesting to examine the exact contexts in which Alfred uses these words in comparison with earlier law-codes, but this is beyond the scope of this thesis. Alfred’s preoccupation with written texts and teaching are not the only features that link the Alfredian Group to the law-code, however. Returning to the first law above, Alfred chooses to begin his code by expressing a concern with loyalty. Whereas Ine opens with a command that his laws be kept by all, Alfred introduces that which, according to him, is most ‘ðearf,’ namely honouring one’s oaths and pledges. Additionally, Alfred’s first law, as Andrew Rabin has noted, is also overall the first law that points to an oath of allegiance,<sup>437</sup> as “previous ‘oath’ legislation referred almost exclusively to either oath-helping or exculpatory declarations.”<sup>438</sup> Alfred thus adapts legislation to his own concerns, based on a Carolingian model.<sup>439</sup> Indeed, Wormald detects an ‘obsession’ with loyalty in the code.<sup>440</sup> The Alfredian Group’s preoccupation with oaths and loyalty have been discussed before, most notably in the discussion of the Old English *Boethius*.<sup>441</sup> Encountering them again in the current, legal, context suggests the conscious incorporation of personal, contemporary, concerns into a document that is conventional and versatile at the same time.

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<sup>435</sup> Alfred uses a form of ‘settan’ on three occasions, namely in laws 4.2., 5, and 4; bebeodað’ is used once, in law 42, as is ‘willað’, in law 5.5. A form of ‘cwædon’ is used twice, in laws 42.2 and 42.5.

<sup>436</sup> These are the first three meanings given by the Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon dictionary, accessed 03-01-2020, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/027563>.

<sup>437</sup> There is a likely Carolingian influence here, as swearing such an oath was common under Charlemagne, see: John Hudson, *The Oxford History of the Laws of England, vol. II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 164. Hudson, however, also expresses valid reservations about interpreting Alfred’s law here as referring to a general oath, p. 163. Oaths were also an important topic for Hincmar of Rheims, who later introduced oaths for kings that entailed “personal, public and written commitment to specific laws and rules.” (Nelson, 254).

<sup>438</sup> Andrew Rabin, “Witnessing Kingship: Royal Power and the Legal Subject in the Old English Laws”, in *Kingship, Legislation and Power in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Brian W. Schneider (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 229.

<sup>439</sup> According to Wormald, Alfred’s changes make the code more Carolingian. Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 283.

<sup>440</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 283.

<sup>441</sup> See, for instance, Sheppard in this regard, *Families of the King*, 59.

The representation of loyalty in the code does not end here, however. One further example sheds more light on the importance the king attached to his people's obedience. On the subject of fighting and vendettas, the law-code states:

Eac we cweðað, þæt mon mote mid his hlaforde feohtan orwige, gif mon on þone hlaford fiohte; swa mot se hlaford mid þy men feohtan (42.5).<sup>442</sup>  
 Æfter þære ilcan wisan mon mot feohtan mid his geborene mæge, gif hine mon on woh onfeohteð, buton wið his hlaforde: þæt we ne liefað (42.6).<sup>443</sup>

We also proclaim that a man may fight with his lord without liability, also as a man fights with the lord, the lord may fight with his man.

In the same way a man may fight with a relative by blood, if he is attacked wrongly, apart from with his lord: this we do not allow.

This law exemplifies the lord-subject relationship valued so highly throughout Alfredian writing. The role of kinsmen is notably absent from legal texts which, as Tom Lambert has observed, are “strongly individualistic.”<sup>444</sup> Therefore the relative absence of references to kinsmen in Alfred's writing is not distinctive. What is distinctive, however, is that in Alfred's law-code this bond between relatives is subtly but unmistakably overshadowed by the relationship between a lord and his people. Thus, it is possible in Alfred's legislation to fight against a relative, but not against one's lord: a person's ties to his lord are more important than those with his relatives.<sup>445</sup> The importance of this law is underscored by the addition of ‘þæt we ne liefað,’ which puts additional royal authority behind the regulation.

Further insights into the distinctiveness of Alfred's code can be seen in its treatment of ealdormen and bishops. As discussed earlier, Alfred's relationship with those in religious power appears to have been uneasy, and this impression resurfaces in the law-code. Indeed, here religious authority is integrated into secular authority. Thus, we find laws in the code legislating for bishops, and ones that place ealdormen on the same

<sup>442</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 76.

<sup>443</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 76.

<sup>444</sup> Tom Lambert, *Law and Order in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 53.

<sup>445</sup> As we have seen in the discussion of Cynewulf and Cynheard in chapter 1.

footing, whilst the clergy are removed from a position in which they were consulted in the legal process, as the preface makes clear. In other words, Alfred not only erases the clergy from their traditional advisory role, but also chips away at their position *within* the code by elevating secular ealdormen to the same status. For example, in one instance dealing with fighting or drawing weapons, Alfred decrees that if this is done in the presence of the archbishop the fine is 150 shillings, and ‘gif beforan oðrum biscepe oððe ealdormen ðis gelimpe, mid hundteontegum scill. gebete’ (15)<sup>446</sup> (if this happens in front of another bishop or an ealdorman, he must pay 100 shillings.) Ealdorman and bishop are thus allotted an equal position in legislation. Keeping in mind that ealdormen were close to the king, not just through intermarriage but also through oaths,<sup>447</sup> Alfred’s ‘promotion’ of this secular power through his laws makes sense: they were more likely to be loyal to their king.

### 2.5.5. Conclusion

The three sections of the law-code all make a significant contribution to the text as a whole. The prologue establishes Alfred’s authority as a Christian ruler, building on Mosaic law and portraying the king as the successor, at least in his role as legislator, of both Moses and Christ. As such, the prologue is similar to the preface in attempting to imbue the code with past authority. The preface does so from a secular perspective, indicating that Alfred’s subjects are united by both their shared Christianity and their shared past. The oral legal traditions resulting from this past are consciously put in writing. Rather than characterising the code as either a tool for propaganda or as a deeply conventional and indistinctive text, I have argued that its importance lies in the fact that it is both. Alfred uses recognisable legal conventions and adapts them to his own needs and times, as he himself also claims in his first law by using the words ‘mæst ðearf’ to discuss the importance of oaths and pledges and, by extension, loyalty. As a whole, then, the code’s three parts combined show it to be a dynamic, versatile, text that builds on past traditions, both religious and secular, and provides future generations with a firm foundation to continue to legislate according to need and necessity. It is this practical use

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<sup>446</sup> Liebermann, *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 58.

<sup>447</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 272–273.

of a conventional legal system that has led Alfred to be regarded as the “founder of English law” during the reign of Henry II, even after the Conquest and a regime change.<sup>448</sup>

## 2.6. The Old English Psalms

### 2.6.1. Introduction

The Old English Psalms, translated in the final decade of the ninth century, is one of the later texts associated with the reign of King Alfred. It occurs in only one manuscript, known as the Paris Psalter, which probably dates to the second half of the eleventh century.<sup>449</sup> It has received relatively little scholarly attention compared with the texts discussed so far, with the possible exception of the *Soliloquies*. Recent years, however, have seen renewed critical interest. Patrick O’Neill, opening with William of Malmesbury’s twelfth-century assertion that Alfred had started a translation of the Psalms but had died before he could complete it, has surveyed the arguments attributing the translation to Alfred. He notes that there is “a similar underlying method of translation” with the *Pastoral Care*, and concludes that

when to these fundamental agreements are added many other types of evidence (especially that of word choice), which, despite their disparate nature, harmonize as to time, place, or person, the only reasonable conclusion is that Alfred was the author.<sup>450</sup>

This assessment would go some way to returning the Old English Psalms to its previous position in the Alfredian Group. However, the translation’s place regarding the king’s educational programme is somewhat harder to establish. As O’Neill has noted, the text’s didactic style is reminiscent of the *Pastoral Care*, and one can imagine the translation being used by learners of Latin.<sup>451</sup> On the other hand, there are personal reasons why the Psalms would have drawn Alfred’s attention, chief amongst which are its Davidic

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<sup>448</sup> Wormald, *The Making of English Law*, 285.

<sup>449</sup> Patrick P. O’Neill, ed., *King Alfred’s Old English Prose Translation of the First Fifty Psalms* (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 2001), 1–6.

<sup>450</sup> O’Neill, “The Prose Translation”, 94–95.

<sup>451</sup> O’Neill, “The Prose Translation”, 95–96.

elements. This focus once again links the Psalms closely with the *Pastoral Care*. Indeed, David's role is highlighted by the Psalmist in the introductions. As these are more open to adjustments, which can then place the Psalms into a ninth-century Alfredian context, they will be my focus. I have selected several of the introductions that stand out the most, for various reasons discussed below, and will use them to argue that the Psalms' expansion of the role of David, and the inclusion of Hezekiah, suggest a work that was intended to be both public and personal. The Psalmist, as noted above argued by O'Neill to have been Alfred himself, employs themes and events already encountered in this chapter, such as the loss of wisdom and the suffering of a kingdom under attack. Significantly, however, he lifts them out of their Old Testament contexts and repositions them to reflect the concerns of ninth-century Wessex. As a result, a sense of unity is encouraged through this continuity between Old Testament Israel and Alfredian Wessex, as the Psalmist positions the latter as a 'New Israel.'<sup>452</sup> At the same time, on the personal level, we can find a reflection of Alfred in the description of David, tormented both by physical troubles and concerns for the safety of his kingdom. Alfred's royal authority is, therefore, strengthened despite political difficulties, as God in the end will help the English under Alfred just as he did the Judeans under David. In the meantime, the Old English translation of the Psalms is a source of support for a troubled king and offers guidance, of both the spiritual and practical kind, to his people.

### 2.6.2. The Loss of Wisdom

The text's interest in contemporising a Davidic narrative, aligning it more closely with both ninth-century political reality and Alfred's personal concerns, becomes clear from the introductions' representation of wisdom.<sup>453</sup> Rather than an exhortation to gather wisdom, or a eulogy on its importance, the approach taken by the Psalmist is evocative of the preface to the *Pastoral Care*. The introductions to Psalms XI and XIII are of special significance here for, as David Pratt has noted, they "were each related to sapiential decline, mirroring royal priorities."<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Orton, "Royal Piety", 477.

<sup>453</sup> Each Psalm, apart from Psalm 1, opens with an introduction, with most of them giving four interpretations. See O'Neill, *King Alfred's Translation*, 97–98.

<sup>454</sup> Pratt, *Political Thought*, 252.

The introduction to Psalm XI positions the loss of wisdom as a concern of both present and past rulers, highlighting the continuity between Biblical times and ninth-century Wessex, and implying a similar link between David, Christ, and Alfred.<sup>455</sup>

1° þa Dafid þisne endleftan sealm sang, þa seofode he on þam sealme þæt on his dagum sceolde rihtwisnes and wisdom beon swa swiðe alegen;

4° and swa deð ælc rihtwis mann: þonne he þysne sealm singð, þonne mænð he to Drihtne þæt unriht þæt on his dagum bið;

3° and swa dyde Crist: þa he hine sang, þa mænde he to Drihtne Iudea ungeleaffulnesse.<sup>456</sup>

When David sang this eleventh Psalm, he then lamented in the Psalm that in his day righteousness and wisdom had been brought so low; and so does every righteous man: when he sings this Psalm, then he complains to God of the evil that exists in his days.

And so did Christ: when he sang it, he complained to God about the unbelief of Judea.

The approach to the Psalm in this introduction is marked by a sense of nostalgia. This nostalgia for a better past where wisdom existed is strikingly similar to the one expressed in the preface to the *Pastoral Care*. Furthermore, it is made contemporary to a ninth-century audience by the repetition of ‘on his dagum;’ David complained of the situation in his day, and every righteous man should do the same for his own.<sup>457</sup> ‘Deð,’ in the third person present, highlights the shift to the present. The introduction to Psalm XI, then, provides not just a lament on the undoing of righteousness and wisdom, but also points out that this is not just a concern of the past, one specifically held by David, but also a present one —and thus applicable to Alfred as well. This interpretation finds further support in the first sentence of the Psalm itself, where the author has made a significant addition:

<sup>455</sup> In a similar fashion to the law code, as discussed above.

<sup>456</sup> O’Neill, *King Alfred’s Old English*, 110. The numbers refer to the different interpretations of the Psalm, see O’Neill, *King Alfred’s Old English*, 23–24.

<sup>457</sup> This moral interpretation, indicating the Psalms relevance for a contemporary audience, is present in most introductions. O’Neill, *King Alfred’s Old English*, 23–25.

Gehæl me, Drihten, for þam haligdom is nu on þisum tidum fullneah asprungen, and soðfæstnes ys swyðe gelytlod.<sup>458</sup>

Save me, Lord, for the holiness is now in these times almost vanished, and truth is much diminished.

The Psalmist adds the phrase on ‘þisum tidum’ to the translation, thus contemporising the Psalm’s concerns. Psalm XIII reinforces this idea by doing something very similar. It has the loss of wisdom at its heart, though this time it is coupled to trust, or good faith.

1° Ða Dædrihten þisne þreototeoðan sealm sang, þa seofode he to Drihtne on þam sealme þæt æfre on his dagum sceolde gewurðan swa lytle treowa, and swa lytel wisdom wære on worulde;

4° and swa deð ælc rihtwis man þe hine nu singð, he seofað þæt ylce be his tidum;

3° and swa dyde Crist be Iudeum;

2° and Ezechias be Rapsace, Assyria cyninge.<sup>459</sup>

When David sang this thirteenth Psalm, he then lamented to God in the Psalm that always in his days there should be so little faith, and so little wisdom in the world; And so does every righteous man who sings it now, he laments the same about his times.

And so did Christ about the Judeans.

And Ezechias about Rapsace, the king of Assyria.

As before, there is a concern with continuity, discernible in those words relating to time (‘on his dagum,’ ‘nu,’ ‘his tidum’). In the combined voices of David and the righteous man, we may hear a ninth-century, arguably royal, voice. The result is the alignment of ninth-century pre-Conquest England with Israel, and of David with Alfred, through a lamentation on the loss of wisdom then and now.

<sup>458</sup> O’Neill, *King Alfred’s Old English*, 110.

<sup>459</sup> O’Neill, *King Alfred’s Translation*, 112.



### 2.6.3. The King's Troubles

Several of the Psalms' introductions are concerned with a king's troubles, reflecting Alfred's worries as related by Asser.<sup>460</sup> The introduction to Psalm XV is a noteworthy example, as each interpretation references hardships.

1° Þone fifteoðan sealm Dauid sang be his earfoðum, ægðer ge modes ge lichaman;

2° and eft swa ilce Ezechias hine sang be his mettrumnesse, wilnode him to Gode sumre frofre;

4° and swa deð ælc rihtwis mann þe hine singð on his earfoðum;

3° and swa dyde Crist þa he hine sang.<sup>461</sup>

The fifteenth Psalm David sang about his troubles, both of the mind and of the body.

And often in the same way did Hezekiah sing it about his illness, he asked God for some solace;

And so does every righteous man when he sings it in his troubles.

And so did Christ when he sang it.

As Pratt has noted, the events in David's life remain vague, referred to only as hardships both physical and mental in nature.<sup>462</sup> This allows the author to create parallels with Hezekiah, Christ, and 'every righteous man.' The most important parallel for the present discussion is, of course, with Alfred. Asser dedicates much attention to Alfred's infirmities, and creates a poignant image of a king who spends his time either in physical pain or in fear of its return.<sup>463</sup> Alfred's mental troubles can here perhaps be best understood as difficulties facing his kingship and kingdom, especially the continuing Viking raids towards the end of his reign, when the Psalms were translated, for instance

<sup>460</sup> As described, for instance, in Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 101–102.

<sup>461</sup> O'Neill, *King Alfred's Translation*, 114.

<sup>462</sup> Pratt, *Political Thought*, 251.

<sup>463</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 88–90. On Alfred's physical health see also David Pratt, "The Illnesses of Alfred the Great", *Anglo-Saxon England* 30 (2001): 39–90.

in the winter of 894 near London.<sup>464</sup> The inclusion of Hezekiah, who has already been mentioned in other introductions, in this context reinforces this dual nature of the king's troubles, as it also shows similarities with the Alfredian ideal of kingship. Hezekiah, king of Judah in the Old Testament, was said to have suffered from a serious illness from which he recovered against all expectations with help from God. Additionally, his kingdom came under attack several times and, notably, he instructed fortifications to be built, including a wall.<sup>465</sup> Thus, Alfred may not only have seen his own concerns, both mental and physical, reflected in this Old Testament king. Hezekiah's interest in building may have struck a chord for Alfred too, or may even have influenced him in his building programmes.

Alfred's military concerns are reinforced by an addition to Psalm XVII relating to the burghal system. In a passage in which the Psalmist asks God to lighten his darkness, he expands:

and þurh mines Godes fultum ic utgange ofer minre burge weall, þeah heo sy utan behringed mid minum feondum.<sup>466</sup>

and through my God's help I go out over the wall of my burh, even though it is surrounded by my enemies on the outside.

As David Pratt has noted, "though prompted by Theodore, the burghal reference is Alfred's own, bearing close resemblance to at least one account of West-Saxon defensive tactics."<sup>467</sup> The account Pratt mentions here is, once more, Asser's. As before, Asser's biography substantiates and reinforces ideas expressed in the Alfredian Group and other texts associated with Alfred. The addition does not only hint at the expression of the king's own concerns, but it also associates it with ninth-century secular concerns in general. This strategy is one of several which allows the Psalmist to position Alfred's kingdom as similar to, and the successor of, Judea, and Alfred as a new David. The

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<sup>464</sup> Abels, *Alfred the Great*, 301.

<sup>465</sup> References to the 'Broad Wall,' as part of Judea's defensive system, can be found, for example, in Nehemiah 3:8.

<sup>466</sup> O'Neill, *King Alfred's Old English*, 118.

<sup>467</sup> Pratt, *Political Thought*, 255. Pratt gives as an example the battle against the Vikings at Countisbury fortress in Devon, in 878.

military theme returns frequently in the Psalms, and in several guises. Psalm XLIII is especially noteworthy, as it combines a description of current suffering against the backdrop of past successes:

peah þu, Drihten, us nu adrifen hæbbe fram þe and us gebysmrod, and mid us ne fare on fyrd, swa þu geo dydest.<sup>468</sup>

Still you, Lord, have now expelled us from you and have derided us, and you do not go with us on military expedition, as you did before.

In his discussion of this Psalm, Pratt mentions that the results of God's absence on military expeditions leads to military disaster.<sup>469</sup> However, he does not discuss the significance of portraying God as a military, secular, leader in more detail. What the Psalmist ultimately laments is the lack of leadership, with which he underscores the dangers of bad or absent authority. The severity of the situation caused by this leadership vacuum is aggravated by the memory of better times, when God did lead his people. Moreover, it is unclear why God has abandoned them, as the people have not abandoned Him:

Eall þas earfoðu becoman ofer us, and ne forgeate we þeah na þe, ne þæt woh ne worhton þæt we þine æ forleten, ne ure mod ne eode on bæclincg fram þe.<sup>470</sup>

All these troubles have come over us, and yet we did not forget you, nor did we do the injustice that we abandoned your law, neither did our mind go away from you.

All this leads the Psalmist to wonder

For hwi wendst þu þinne andwlitan fram us, oððe hwy forgytst þu ure yrmða and ure geswinc?<sup>471</sup>

<sup>468</sup> O'Neill, *King Alfred's Old English*, 153.

<sup>469</sup> Pratt, *Political Thought*, 258.

<sup>470</sup> O'Neill, *King Alfred's Translation*, 154.

<sup>471</sup> O'Neill, *King Alfred's Translation*, 154.

Why do you turn your face away from us, or why do you forget our miseries and our tribulations?

Pratt calls this question “arresting,” considering the Alfredian programmes in learning, law, and defensive works. He also makes the link between the translation of the Psalms (around 892) and the return of the Vikings.<sup>472</sup> Pratt proceeds to point out that other Psalms do offer hope and signs of fidelity. Nonetheless, the despair in this Psalm is striking. From Alfred’s point of view, it is certainly understandable. It does not take a lot of imagination to conjure up an image of Alfred, having improved the defence of his country both by introducing a new defensive system and by improving learning and faith, in desperation at the recommenced attacks, and not comprehending where he has gone wrong. God’s depiction as a military leader here highlights the Psalmist’s eagerness to understand just this. A kingdom without a leader is left defenceless. A king can build and plan for attacks, as Alfred did, but if God has withdrawn from his leadership of the kingdom as a whole, these plans will be fruitless.

#### 2.6.4. Conclusion

As Daniel Orton has argued, “David provided a potent exemplar for Christian kingship, embodying and prefiguring the humility and priesthood of Christ while also functioning as a martially successful warrior-king.”<sup>473</sup> This is highlighted by the addition, where absent, of a Davidic interpretation to the introductions, and at times by additions to the Psalms themselves. More specifically, David is a good example for Alfred to follow because of his status as priest-king, at once close to God and to his people as their secular leader.<sup>474</sup> The similarities that were undoubtedly noted between the personal lives of the two kings are likely to have strengthened this idea.<sup>475</sup> Additionally, the focus on David allows the Psalmist to draw an analogy between Alfred’s kingdom and that of the Old Testament king: both beset by invasions and attacks, despairing of God’s apparent

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<sup>472</sup> Pratt, *Political Thought*, 258.

<sup>473</sup> Orton, “Royal Piety”, 490.

<sup>474</sup> This treatment is similar to that of Moses in the Biblical introduction to the law code, as both a representative of God and a secular leader.

<sup>475</sup> Alfred, like David, was the youngest of several brothers and unlikely to become king. For other similarities see the discussion of the *Pastoral Care*.

absence but yet hopeful of divine intervention. David's death, of old age and after having been promised that as long as his family obey God his descendants will be kings, may have given Alfred a further reason to identify himself with the Biblical king in the hope of a similar ending. The introductions, then, create a link between David's times and the ninth century, equating the pre-Conquest kingdom with Israel, resulting in a text that would serve both the king and his people. However, rather than merely serving as a reference, the comparison also instills the Psalms with hope: despite all the tribulations, in the end God's people will be saved. Considering the political reality at the end of the ninth century, Alfred's hope would have been the same for his people.

## 2.7. Conclusion

Alfred's genealogy, provided by Asser, can almost serve as a summary of the Alfredian vision of royal authority. Asser traces Alfred's ancestors back to the brothers Ingild and Ine, to a man called "Gewis, after whom the Welsh call that whole race the Gewisse," to Woden, and finally to Geat, "whom the pagans for a long time worshipped as a God."<sup>476</sup> In this genealogy, Asser emphasises Alfred's descent from a long line of kings, extending his authority by including kinship with the Welsh. He also looks to Rome, mentioning that Alfred's admired kinsman Ine, also an important figure in the law-code, went to Rome and died there "honourably."<sup>477</sup> Despite this emphasis on religious devotion in Alfred's lineage, Asser does not hide the king's pagan ancestors, such as Woden and Geat. The genealogy shows the versatility of the Alfredian vision of kingship in skillfully integrating secular and Christian traditions, all leading to Alfred's ideal kingship. Likewise, the texts discussed in this chapter present a vision of royal authority that remodels and integrates ideals of rulership from many sources into an ideal that suits Alfred, his times, and his political aims. These Alfredian texts, whether or not they were compiled and translated, partially translated, or were ordered to be translated by the king, show a remarkable uniformity and emanated from the king's court. The Alfredian Group as a whole, plus the law-code, portray an ideal form of kingship as comprised of the best elements of both secular and religious traditions, arising from the ninth-century's cultural milieu. The relationship between a king and his people, ultimately dependent on each

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<sup>476</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 67.

<sup>477</sup> Keynes & Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 67.

other for safekeeping the country, underpins this vision. It is exemplified by the king's generosity and his expectations of loyalty and obedience in return, most clearly visible in the *Boethius* and the *Soliloquies*. Biblical authority is claimed in all texts too, most notably in the *Pastoral Care*, the Biblical introduction to the law-code, and the Psalms. What ultimately defines Alfredian literature, however, is its versatility in relation to its source material. Solomon's wisdom is commendable, but for Alfred's vision it does not go far enough. Wisdom needs to be transmitted, and will then bring the people closer to God. The figure of David, likewise, is transformed into a character more familiar to Alfred and his ninth-century subjects, in ways that highlight both the king's personal troubles and his role as intermediary between God and the people. Alfred takes on the role of teacher and priest, and assumes religious authority, but at the same time defends himself against any possible accusations of immoderation and, specifically, pride. In the end, the picture of kingship that Alfred and his helpers create is one built on past authority (both religious and secular), in order to construct a model of kingship that suits ninth-century political concerns and extends the claims of authority over all those people who are seen as 'English.' While a kingdom of all the English, as envisioned by the king, would only come into being in the reign of his grandson, Æthelstan,<sup>478</sup> Alfred's model of kingship presents an image of a shared identity under an ideal king, in a Christian kingdom. Alfred the Great's reputation may only have reached its peak when he was given his epithet in the sixteenth century, but the vision of kingship that is championed in the legacy of his reign stirred earlier writers too. The *Proverbs of King Alfred*, compiled in the mid-twelfth century, contain a collection of wise sayings attributed to Alfred, though there is no indication that the *Proverbs* are pre-Conquest, let alone Alfredian.<sup>479</sup> What the *Proverbs* show, therefore, is that Alfred's reputation as king had developed to such an extent that, even after the Conquest and the end of the English royal line, someone felt it to be fitting to ascribe a selection of wise sayings to him.<sup>480</sup> Regardless therefore of Alfred's real personality and kingship, the picture created of him and his country in the Alfredian Group and associated texts was, as intended, influential in the future. Indeed, in attributing

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<sup>478</sup> Sarah Foot, *Æthelstan: The First King of England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>479</sup> Olof Sigfrid Arngart, *The Proverbs of Alfred* (Lund, 1942).

<sup>480</sup> Alfred is also given an interesting description in the first passage. Besides references to his learning and strength, he is referred to as "Englene derling" (England's darling) and "King ant cleric," a description which, based on Alfred's portrayal in the Alfredian Group and by Asser, would surely have met with his approval.

a later compiled text to Alfred, the author also continued the Alfredian practice of treating texts as versatile documents, to be adapted and suited to one's own aims. It stands, therefore, as a memorial to the resilience of the Alfredian narrative of kingship.

## Chapter 3: Arthurian Literature in the Twelfth Century

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter considers conceptions of kingship in three twelfth-century texts: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Wace's *Roman de Brut*, and Layamon's *Brut*. These three texts, composed in the space of approximately sixty years, are closely linked. Geoffrey finished his *Historia* around 1136,<sup>481</sup> weaving together the work of Gildas, Bede and Nennius, Welsh and Breton legend and, notably, his own imagination, "his purpose being to supply England with the national history, the myth of national emergence, that it lacked."<sup>482</sup> Abigail Wheatley makes an important point when she states Geoffrey's aim more specifically: "... it seems likely that Geoffrey intended to boost the history and pride of his own people, the Britons, while making their legends palatable to the Norman ruling classes."<sup>483</sup> As Elisabeth van Houts has noted, it is striking how chroniclers, both in England and on the Continent, dedicated so much time and space to the defeat of the Britons rather than that of the English.<sup>484</sup> At least in the case of Geoffrey's *Historia*, the use of the history of the Britons and their struggles against the Saxons allowed for an exploration of contemporary concerns within a more distant historical framework. This way questions of (legitimate) leadership and power could be approached more safely, as they could only be linked to contemporary rulers and events in an indirect manner. Geoffrey's aim with his *Historia*, which can be most clearly seen in the Arthurian part of his text, suggests how writers in the twelfth century may have

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<sup>481</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, transl. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 9. The work was definitely finished by 1139, which is when, "with the stunned amazement of a frustrated researcher, Henry of Huntingdon came across it." Kristen Lee Over, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Politicization of King Arthur", *Kingship, Conquest, and Patria: Literary and Cultural Identities in Medieval French and Welsh Arthurian Romance*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 37.

<sup>482</sup> Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: a Short Introduction*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 8.

<sup>483</sup> Abigail Wheatley, *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England* (York: York Medieval Press, 2004), 55. For a succinct overview of opinions on Geoffrey's aims, see Kristen Lee Over, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", 37–39.

<sup>484</sup> Elisabeth van Houts, "Normandy's View of the Anglo-Saxon Past in the Twelfth Century", *The Long Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past*, ed. Martin Brett and David A. Woodman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 130.



attempted to negotiate this new social order by looking to a more distant past. This negotiation rested on authors dedicating their work to those in authority, and the way in which they presented leadership in their texts. Despite being a Latin text, the inclusion of the *Historia* in this thesis is important because it shows a vision of the past and past kingship which greatly influenced later vernacular texts.

Wace's *Roman de Brut* shows a similar concern with connecting the past to the present. His *Brut* is based on Geoffrey's *Historia*, and was completed only twenty years later (around 1155).<sup>485</sup> The Norman Wace turned Geoffrey's Latin prose into octosyllabic French couplets,<sup>486</sup> and presented his work to Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, wife of England's first Angevin king, Henry II. Eleanor's known interest in Arthurian romance may have played a part in Wace's decision to render a new version of Geoffrey's work.<sup>487</sup>

Layamon's *Brut* is, in turn, a reworking of Wace's poem. Probably composed towards the end of the twelfth century, in English, Layamon's version could, according to Derek Pearsall, be the first or perhaps even the "only true English national epic."<sup>488</sup> Wace and Layamon were not, however, the only authors who wrote Arthurian histories based on Geoffrey's *Historia*. Henry of Huntingdon had already briefly mentioned Arthur in his *Historia Anglorum*, and both he and another historian, Gerald of Wales, were greatly influenced by Geoffrey's work, which they incorporated into their own histories.<sup>489</sup> By the end of the thirteenth century Geoffrey's influence had extended to medieval poets as well, both directly and indirectly.<sup>490</sup> My arguments focus on Geoffrey's *Historia*, Wace's *Roman de Brut*, and Layamon's *Brut* for two reasons. As mentioned earlier, they are closely related (Layamon adapted Wace's work as Wace had done with Geoffrey). However, their differences reveal much about changing notions of kingship and the turbulent political circumstances of the twelfth century. Additionally, the fact that they were written in three different languages portrays a complex society, with different

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<sup>485</sup> Judith Weiss, ed. and transl., *Wace's Roman de Brut: A History of the British* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2010), XII.

<sup>486</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XI.

<sup>487</sup> Elizabeth Salter, *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England*, ed. Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>488</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 16.

<sup>489</sup> Ad Putter, "Latin Historiography after Geoffrey of Monmouth", *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature: The Development and Dissemination of the Arthurian Legend in Medieval Latin*, ed. Siân Echard (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 71.

<sup>490</sup> Putter, "Latin Historiography", 71.

kinds of audiences and with different approaches to and ideas about kingship and authority. Therefore, although these three texts are not the only ones detailing the story of King Arthur, they are representative of the tradition's literary development in the twelfth century.

All three texts have received considerable scholarly attention (Geoffrey of Monmouth perhaps most of all), especially when it comes to their Arthurian passages.<sup>491</sup> However, little attention has been paid to the texts' depiction of Arthurian kingship as continuation or discontinuation of earlier, pre-Conquest, ideas about royal authority.

The use of a violent event such as a conquest has, as Kathleen Davis has noted, provided "self-evident status" to pre-Conquest and post-Conquest periodization.<sup>492</sup>

However, some scholars, such as Elaine Treharne, have challenged the idea that the Old English language and traditions, be they literary or cultural, died with the Conquest.

Treharne labels this idea a 'misreading': "... one that has been so often repeated that the supposed death of English literature after the Norman Conquest has become an accepted part of literary history recounted by most standard analyses of the period."<sup>493</sup> Treharne's rejection of the Conquest as signalling the death of English literature is important for the present chapter. The argument of this chapter is twofold: firstly, I will argue that Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon attempted to express a renewed vision of kingship, and that they used King Arthur to bridge the historical gap they perceived between pre-Conquest and post-Conquest England. Secondly, I will argue that this depiction of Arthur's royal power and the past is built on a reimagined pre-Conquest England, and that Arthur's royal authority is in some ways strikingly similar to the ideals espoused in the Old English texts discussed in chapter one and two, especially in Layamon's version. These three texts demonstrate a gradual shift, moving away from a notion of kingship as mostly based on martial strength and towards an idealisation of stability and continuity firmly grounded in the law. This is not to say nothing changed after the Conquest. However, I suggest that the profound changes to English society and its political structures that arose from the Conquest, and the passage in the twelfth century

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<sup>491</sup> See, for instance: J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

<sup>492</sup> Kathleen Davis, "Periodization and the Matter of Precedent", *Postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1 (2010): 357.

<sup>493</sup> Elaine Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of the Early English, 1020–1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

to Angevin rule, resulted in a desire for unity and stability. With this desire came a fascination with the pre-Conquest past. Indeed, Histories of the past (as opposed to contemporary history) were more popular.<sup>494</sup> Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon then used that past, or rather their perception of it, to highlight their wishes for, and concerns with, England's current and future leadership. The differences in the ways these three authors approach the concept of royal authority through King Arthur, as a consequence, show the complexity of the English political landscape in the twelfth century, and the challenges still facing its rulers. I will discuss each author individually and in chronological order, tracing the development of the story of King Arthur and the texts' approaches to kingship in relation to their predecessors and historical contexts.

## 3.2. Geoffrey of Monmouth

### 3.2.1. Introduction

Geoffrey of Monmouth's work popularised texts dealing with the Matter of Britain,<sup>495</sup> and he was instrumental in preserving and further popularising Arthur.<sup>496</sup> As Kristin Lee Over has noted, "Over two hundred manuscript copies of the *Historia* survive (fifty-eight from the twelfth century), making Geoffrey's work the greatest 'best seller' of the period."<sup>497</sup> As such, it is not surprising that the *Historia* has been studied extensively. For instance, Tatlock's seminal work on Geoffrey's *Historia*, first published in 1950, brought together and provided an in-depth critical assessment of the research until that moment.<sup>498</sup> Furthermore, R. William Leckie has explored how Geoffrey's periodization of the passage of power from Britons to Saxons (as Geoffrey allowed for a far longer dominion of the British than others had done before) influenced contemporary authors. Leckie's

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<sup>494</sup> Michael Staunton, *The Historians of Angevin England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 22.

<sup>495</sup> Françoise Le Saux, "The Reception of the Matter of Britain in Thirteenth-Century England: A Study of Some Anglo-Norman Manuscripts of Wace's *Roman de Brut*", in *Thirteenth Century England X: Proceedings of the Durham Conference, 2003*, ed. Michael Prestwich, Richard Britnell, and Robin Frame (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), 131.

<sup>496</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 7.

<sup>497</sup> Over, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", 39. Lambert and Weiler have argued that one of the reasons that the *Historia* was so popular is because "it employed stylistic markers of reputable history." Lambert and Weiler, *How the Past was Used*, 35.

<sup>498</sup> J. S. P. Tatlock, *The Legendary History of Britain: Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae and its Early Vernacular Versions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

first chapter usefully discusses the availability of sources on early medieval British history.<sup>499</sup>

The *Historia*'s transmission seems to have been not only voluminous but also fast. The contemporary historian Henry of Huntingdon mentioned in 1139 that he had seen the text at Bec and, in the words of Michael Reeve, "it swept through Britain and Northern France."<sup>500</sup> Despite its wide dissemination, Geoffrey's audience appears to have been mostly Anglo-Norman, as the social and political circles he moved in were "primarily, if not exclusively" Anglo-Norman.<sup>501</sup> The identification of the *Historia*'s likely audience is supported by Geoffrey's aim for his work.

Geoffrey states his aim clearly in the dedication, which is addressed to a powerful man: Robert of Gloucester, earl of Gloucester and illegitimate son of Henry I.<sup>502</sup> In this dedication Geoffrey mentions that his intention is to praise the deeds of the kings of Britain. His work, he famously claims, is a translation of an ancient book in the British language, which his friend Walter, archdeacon of Oxford, had given him.<sup>503</sup> The existence of such a book has been met with scepticism ever since, and it has been widely accepted that this book did not in fact exist.<sup>504</sup> Geoffrey states that he had not been able to find any

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<sup>499</sup> R. William Leckie, jr., "Chapter 1: New light on a shadowed past", *Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Periodization of Insular History in the Twelfth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 29–54.

<sup>500</sup> Michael D. Reeve, "The Transmission of the *Historia Regum Britanniae*", *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 1:73.

<sup>501</sup> Jennifer Farrell, "History, Prophecy, and the Arthur of the Normans: The Question of Audience and Motivation Behind Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*", in *Anglo-Norman Studies 37: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 2014*, ed. Elisabeth van Houts (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), 106.

<sup>502</sup> Four editions of the *Historia* are associated directly with Geoffrey, and only one of these is dedicated to Robert only (one is dedicated to Robert and Waleran, a count, another to Robert and King Stephen, and another does not have a dedication). David Howlett has noted that the dedication to Robert alone occurs in most manuscripts of the *Historia*, and argues that this was indeed the original dedication. D.R. Howlett, "The Literary Context of Geoffrey of Monmouth: An Essay on the Fabrication of Sources", *Arthuriana* 5.3 (Fall 1995), 29.

<sup>503</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, ed. Michael D. Reeve and trans. Neil Wright (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>504</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, while not crediting the assertion that the whole *Historia* was a translation of one British book, argues for the existence of a book which gave information about another British king, Riothamus, who was only known in continental sources. Geoffrey, Ashe argues, may have combined the two (though, as he also suggests, Riothamus and Arthur may have been the same character all along). Geoffrey Ashe, "'A Certain Very Ancient Book': Traces of an Arthurian Source in Geoffrey of Monmouth's History", *Speculum* 56.2 (April 1981), 301–323.

information about the Britons, apart from that which he gathered from Bede and Gildas, and that he therefore took it upon himself to write their history.<sup>505</sup> This aim is reflected in the title of his work, and yet it seems to have been often overlooked or misinterpreted. Indeed, while Wright's translation of the title refers to the 'Kings of Britain,' the introduction to his and Reeve's edition of the *Historia* notes that Geoffrey himself probably called it *De gestis Brittonum*.<sup>506</sup> This is an interesting difference, as the *Historia* actually shows that Geoffrey is not so much interested in British kings, but in the kings of Britain. The Britons may have provided Britain with its earliest kings, but a king of Britain, Geoffrey makes clear, is not necessarily a Briton. As I will discuss later, Wace and (especially) Layamon amend this focus on the kingdom's rulership to a greater focus on the land of Britain itself. Nonetheless, I suggest that, regarding himself as a Briton,<sup>507</sup> Geoffrey's purpose was to integrate the history of the Britons (a mostly unwritten one, according to himself), with that of Britain, and to adjust the dominant image of Britons as savage and weak in the eyes of the Anglo-Norman elite. A British king such as Arthur, who fought and, at least at first, defeated the Saxons just as the new Norman rulers had done in 1066, served to reposition the Britons in the history of the island and accord them a more important role in its history and on its political stage. To achieve this, Geoffrey created an Arthur who is very much a martial figure, but who also demonstrates ideas about loyalty and cooperation reminiscent of Old English literature.

It should be noted here that the *Historia* is not solely concerned with Arthur, whose adventures take up approximately a third of the whole work.<sup>508</sup> Indeed, as Siân Echard has argued, the rest of *Historia* provides important context for our understanding of the Arthurian passages.<sup>509</sup> However, I will focus on Arthur because this chapter is

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<sup>505</sup> Geoffrey, *History*, 4.

<sup>506</sup> Michael D. Reeve, "Introduction", *The History of the Kings of Britain*, vii–viii.

<sup>507</sup> While Geoffrey hailed from Monmouth, in south Wales, he is now usually described as being "of Breton extraction" according to Siân Echard, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", *The Arthur of Medieval Latin Literature: The Development and Dissemination of the Arthurian Legend in Medieval Latin*, ed. Siân Echard (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 39. Nonetheless, I follow Gillingham's arguments for seeing Geoffrey as writing from a Welsh perspective, as explained below. See also Michael J. Curley's biography of Geoffrey: Michael J. Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994). Curley shows that Geoffrey identified strongly with his birthplace, Monmouth (1), and so using either Briton or Welsh rather than Breton seems justified.

<sup>508</sup> Echard, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", 38.

<sup>509</sup> Echard, "Geoffrey of Monmouth", 38.

interested in changes in the interpretation of Arthur's royal authority in the twelfth century. Additionally, Arthur shows, more than any other king in the *Historia*, affinity with pre-Conquest ideas about kingship.

In order to understand Geoffrey's representation of royal power, and why Arthur is presented the way he is, it is important to take into account the historical context of his work. Accepting a rough date of completion for the *Historia* of 1136 means that Geoffrey was writing at a time of great political tumult. After the death in 1120 of William, only son and heir of Henry I, Henry attempted to ensure the nobles' support for the succession of his daughter Matilda. To achieve this, oaths of allegiance were sworn three times, in 1127, 1128 (the year of Matilda's marriage to Geoffrey of Anjou), and 1131.<sup>510</sup> Henry's death in 1135 caused a grave succession crisis, aggravated by rumours that he had disinherited Matilda on his deathbed.<sup>511</sup> Matilda's initial inertia was used by her cousin Stephen to have himself crowned as king, and until 1139 he reigned relatively peacefully. The Civil War, also called the Anarchy, truly began when Matilda arrived in England and received support from her half-brother Robert of Gloucester,<sup>512</sup> dedicatee of Geoffrey's *Historia*. The matter was only really resolved at the death of Stephen in 1154 and the succession of Henry II, Matilda's eldest son.<sup>513</sup> This succession signalled the beginning of Angevin rule in England. Thus, it is safe to say that the *Historia* was written during a time of great political unrest and insecurity. The dedication to Robert of Gloucester suggests that, while Geoffrey did not openly take sides, he saw an opportunity to promote his ideas on power and kingship and the role of Britain's past in the forging of a new political future. With Britain's political future so uncertain, Geoffrey used Arthur to promote a kingship that would emphasise cooperation and could help to improve the image of the Britons.

### 3.2.2. Arthur in the *Historia*

Geoffrey was responsible for securing Arthur's popularity, but the legendary ruler had already appeared in earlier texts. His first extant mention occurs in the Welsh legend *Y*

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<sup>510</sup> Christopher Daniell, *From Norman Conquest to Magna Carta: England 1066–1215* (London: Routledge, 2003), 36.

<sup>511</sup> Daniell, *Norman Conquest*, 36–37.

<sup>512</sup> Daniell, *Norman Conquest*, 38.

<sup>513</sup> Daniell, *Norman Conquest*, 44

*Gododdin*, ascribed to a poet called Aneirin.<sup>514</sup> The reference here consists of another hero who is called great but, the poem mentions, “he was not Arthur.”<sup>515</sup> While it is a fleeting reference, describing someone else as ‘not Arthur’ suggests the poet expected Arthur to be a well-known figure to his audience. Arthur materializes briefly in other sources, but a longer reference to the hero can be found in the *Historia Brittonum*, which occurs in a tenth-century manuscript in an Anglo-Norman hand, but was often attributed to the ninth-century Welsh monk Nennius.<sup>516</sup> The *Historia Brittonum* is important as it first presents Arthur as an “historical figure,”<sup>517</sup> though not as a king but as a commander:

Then it was, that the magnanimous Arthur, with all the kings and military force of Britain, fought against the Saxons. And though there were many more noble than himself, yet he was twelve times chosen their commander, and was as often conqueror.<sup>518</sup>

It is interesting to note here how the author emphasises that Arthur was not only not a king, but was not even a noble. Arthur is described as ‘dux bellorum’ (battle-leader), or ‘miles’ (warrior).<sup>519</sup> Despite his lack of noble blood, he gained his men’s trust and they chose him to lead them. Arthur is a notable absence from Gildas’ *De Excidio et Conquestu Britanniae* (often referred to as *On the Ruin of Britain*), although this text is mentioned by Geoffrey in his dedication alongside Bede. Geoffrey remarked that he was unable to find any information about Britain’s early kings, apart from those mentioned by Gildas and Bede. Interestingly, neither of these refers to Arthur.<sup>520</sup>

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<sup>514</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 3.

<sup>515</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 3.

<sup>516</sup> N.J. Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 119. Higham expresses doubts about the attribution of the *Historia Brittonum* to Nennius, and prefers to see the text as by an anonymous author, as most scholars now do (121).

<sup>517</sup> Higham, *Myth-making and History*, 117.

<sup>518</sup> *Historia Brittonum*, transl. J.A. Giles, 23. Online, accessed 17-9-2019.  
[https://www.yorku.ca/inpar/nennius\\_giles.pdf](https://www.yorku.ca/inpar/nennius_giles.pdf).

<sup>519</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 3.

<sup>520</sup> For a succinct overview of sources for a historical Arthur, and a discussion of his absence in Gildas and Bede, see Norris J. Lacey, Geoffrey Ashe, with Deborah N. Mancoff, “Chapter 1: Origins”, in *The Arthurian Handbook* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 1–55.

A final point here needs to be made about the possibility of Arthur having existed in British oral lore before his stories were put into writing. The twelfth-century historian William of Newburgh assessed Geoffrey's work with these damning words:

At contra quidam nostris temporibus pro expiandis his Brittonum maculis scriptor emersit ridicula de eisdem figmenta contexens, eosque longe supra virtutem Macedonum et Romanorum impudenti vanitate attollens. Gaufridus hic dictus est agnomen habens Arturi, pro eo quod fabulas de Arturo ex priscis Brittonum figmentis sumptas et ex proprio auctas per superductum Latini sermonis colorem honesto historiae nomine palliavit.

But in our own day a writer of the opposite tendency has emerged. To atone for these faults of the Britons he weaves a laughable web of fiction about them, with shameless vainglory extolling them far above the virtue of the Macedonians and the Romans. This man is called Geoffrey and bears the soubriquet Arthur, because he has taken up the stories about Arthur from the old fictitious accounts of the Britons, has added to them himself, and by embellishing them in the Latin tongue he has cloaked them with the honourable title of history.<sup>521</sup>

Two elements here should be highlighted. Firstly, Newburgh sees Geoffrey's work as aiming to restore or establish a good reputation for the Welsh.<sup>522</sup> As I have mentioned above, I agree with this assessment, but would add that his aim goes further: the creation of a positive representation of the Welsh serves the author's wish to unite Welsh and

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<sup>521</sup> William of Newburgh, *The History of English Affairs*, ed. and trans. P. G. Walsh and M. J. Kennedy (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 28–29.

<sup>522</sup> I use Welsh here rather than Britons following John Gillingham's arguments for seeing Geoffrey as writing from a Welsh perspective. As Gillingham has noted, Geoffrey's critique of the Welsh has long been seen as evidence of anti-Welsh sentiments. But, as he rightly points out, "... on such grounds as these we might as well argue that the sympathies of Wulfstan, the author of the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos* were not with the English, or that Gildas' sympathies weren't British. The belief that the present generation is sinful, and being punished by God for its sins, was surely too commonplace for it to lend support to any such theory." Additionally, Gillingham cites research showing Geoffrey's familiarity with Welsh, and not Breton. John Gillingham, "The Context and Purposes of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*", in *The English in the Twelfth Century: imperialism, national identity and political values* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 24.



Norman interests. The second element concerns the supposed oral foundations of Arthur's story. Newburgh suggests that, by writing the story down in Latin, Geoffrey has given credence to 'fictitious' British tales. Daniel Helbert has argued that the way in which these stories were conveyed was linked to ethnicity: Oral (British) versus written Latin, with the latter attempting to discredit the oral origins of Arthurian stories by emphasising that they are "said (dicere)" and derive "from oral stories (fabulas)."<sup>523</sup> The Anglo-Norman urge to discredit Arthurian stories is closely linked to the prophecy of Arthur's return to assist the Britons in their hour of need, a feature called the Breton Hope, which was often used as "evidence of Welsh barbarity and used as justification for continued colonization."<sup>524</sup> A lingering Brittonic belief in the return of a heroic king, then, did not serve Anglo-Norman ambitions. Importantly, however, Helbert warns against crediting the Anglo-Norman elite's statements that Arthur had endured in British oral tradition. This assumption is solely based on Anglo-Norman sources, and Helbert suggests that it was used as propaganda for "colonialism and professional competition."<sup>525</sup> Thus, we should be cautious to assume oral sources for Arthurian tales.

The main point here is that the lack of a (written) Arthurian backstory allowed Geoffrey to construct and put forth an Arthur who could be used as a vehicle for his ideas about politics and royal authority. In other words, Arthur becomes the embodiment of the kind of leader Geoffrey felt was needed in his time. John Gillingham has argued that this necessity had become urgent in the years 1136 and 1137, with the strife between Empress Matilda and King Stephen spiralling into civil war (which I will discuss in more detail below). According to Gillingham, Geoffrey had probably already decided on "giving the Welsh an honourable and civilised past." However, as Robert of Gloucester, Geoffrey's patron, had allied himself with the Welsh, "It was now also a question of giving a distinguished pedigree to a people that had suddenly begun to play once more—as their prophecies said they would—a major part in the politics of Britain."<sup>526</sup> Gillingham, then, in Geoffrey's aims sees a desire not only to rectify the reputation of the Welsh in the past, but also to help their cause in the present. I would argue that a nod to the future could be added here as well: Geoffrey intended to set the record straight regarding the British past,

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<sup>523</sup> Daniel Helbert, "'An Arður sculde ȝete cum': The Prophetic Hope in Twelfth-Century Britain", *Arthuriana* 26.1 (Spring 2016), 86.

<sup>524</sup> Helbert, "The Prophetic Hope", 84.

<sup>525</sup> Helbert, "The Prophetic Hope", 90.

<sup>526</sup> Gillingham, *The English in the Twelfth Century*, 37.

aiding them in their present endeavours by presenting a positive image and, additionally, through king Arthur himself, demonstrate how Welsh and Norman interests could co-exist in the future and, perhaps, in one kingdom, under one king. Notably, the Arthur Geoffrey establishes is by no means a perfect king, but a king who exhibited the skills and character he believed were needed to show the Anglo-Norman ruling class that the Welsh were not ‘barbarians,’ and that cooperation and indeed a sense of unity between the two would be beneficial for all.

That Geoffrey uses Arthur to establish an ideal of cooperation becomes clear at the beginning of his rule. Arthur first enters the scene after the death of his father, when he is crowned king at the age of fifteen. Geoffrey remarks that, despite Arthur’s young age, he was “...inauditae uirtutis atque largitatis, in quo tantam gratiam innata bonitas praestiterat, ut a cunctis fere populis amaretur”<sup>527</sup> (of great promise and generosity, whose innate goodness ensured that he was loved by almost everybody).<sup>528</sup> This general introduction to Arthur’s kingship highlights generosity which, as I have discussed in the previous chapters, was central to earlier descriptions of good kingship. Geoffrey’s introduction to Arthur, then, appears to be based on a general image of royal authority. The mention that Arthur was loved by *almost* all of his people is interesting, and may foreshadow later treachery. A couple of lines later Geoffrey describes his hero more specifically: “Arturus ergo, quia in illo probitas largitionem comitabatur, statuit Saxones inquietare, ut eorum opibus quae ei famulabatur ditaret familiam”<sup>529</sup> (In Arthur courage was closely linked with generosity, and he made up his mind to harry the Saxons, so that with their wealth he might reward the retainers who served his own household).<sup>530</sup> Rather than simply repeating the aforementioned quality of generosity, Geoffrey here explains how it is connected to courage, and how one cannot exist without the other. This attitude is reminiscent of *Beowulf*, where kings were required to conquer and do battle in order to acquire the wealth necessary to reward their men’s loyalty. The ideal result is a social cohesion amongst men, who display their masculinity by cementing positive relations between them.<sup>531</sup> Unlike the Alfredian model of kingship, this approach lacks the

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<sup>527</sup> ll. 9–11, Liber IX, 193. All Latin citations and translations from the *Historia* are from the edition by Reeve and Wright.

<sup>528</sup> Liber IX, 192.

<sup>529</sup> ll. 14–16, Liber IX, 193.

<sup>530</sup> Liber IX, 192.

<sup>531</sup> Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 57–61.

emphasis on the relationship being one of mutual dependency; loyalty is directly connected with the promise of material wealth (and, inherently, status) rather than an attitude which will benefit the kingdom as a whole. From Arthur's first appearances in the *Historia*, Geoffrey appears to be adhering to a pre-Conquest, non-specific ideal of kingship.<sup>532</sup> This is not surprising if we recall his aims for the text. It was important to Geoffrey that Arthur should be placed into a tradition of writing about heroic kings, to make him part of an ongoing narrative stretching back to pre-Conquest England.

Nevertheless, Arthur is a very different king compared to Geoffrey's other kings in the *Historia*, as Gillingham has commented:

King Arthur presides over a magnificent and fashionable court, but otherwise the world in which he lives is entirely dominated by war. He founds no towns, issues no laws, shows no concern for the well-being of farmers. He is a warrior-king, a figure from an heroic-age, endowed with some overtones of chivalry to bring him up-to-date, but in no sense a paradigm of good civilian kingship.<sup>533</sup>

The depiction of a warrior king, who does not concern himself with building works or the law, or indeed with people who are not his retainers and warriors, is again reminiscent of *Beowulf*. While Gillingham does recognise the difference between Arthur and Geoffrey's other kings, he does not discuss it further. However, the distinction is important and reveals much about Geoffrey's views on kingship. The fact that Geoffrey does not describe his other kings in the same way suggests that it is a deliberate choice for Arthur, rather than a general preference and an indication of a personal interest in warfare, as has been suggested by some scholars. Pearsall, for instance, has argued that Geoffrey is not interested in interpersonal relationships, but mostly in battles and heroic deeds.<sup>534</sup> While it is true that Geoffrey discusses battles and war more than royal relationships, I suggest this should be seen in the light of Geoffrey's successors in the telling of Arthur's story; compared to Wace and Layamon, for instance, Geoffrey pays less attention to the relationships Arthur has with his wife Guinevere or his nephew Gawain. This does not demonstrate Geoffrey's indifference towards people's relationships. In fact, as we have

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<sup>532</sup> Regarding Geoffrey's politics, Tatlock even noted that "Geoffrey was an unanalytical, 'unconscious,' man." Tatlock, *The Legendary History*, 284.

<sup>533</sup> Gillingham, "The English", 37.

<sup>534</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 10.

seen, Arthur's first appearance in the text hinges on two royal qualities, courage and generosity. What Geoffrey explicitly tells us here is that a warrior-king is, *by definition*, a king who takes his retainers' loyalty seriously and wishes to reward them; as Geoffrey states, the two are inextricably linked. A focus on warfare and the expansion of Arthur's realm does not negate but in effect underpins the nature and the importance of interpersonal relationships in Geoffrey's vision of royal authority. I will discuss the nature of these interpersonal relationships in more detail later.

This vision of kingship rests on several ideas or themes in Geoffrey's depiction of Arthur and are firmly grounded in the political realities of the 1130s. Firstly, there are the people Geoffrey identifies as the enemies of the British. The Saxons are, of course, Arthur's main opponents, but Geoffrey also tells specifically of the Scots, Picts, and Irish. The latter Arthur defeats quickly, however: "Potitus ilico uictoria, uacauit iterum delere gentem Scotorum atque Pictorum, incommutabili saeuitiae indulgens."<sup>535</sup> (Once victorious, he redirected his attention to the Scots and Picts and began wiping them out with utter ruthlessness).<sup>536</sup> Why is Arthur suddenly so ruthless in his dealings with the Scots? Geoffrey mentions that the Scots had fought Arthur three times previously,<sup>537</sup> but they do not present a threat nor are so hated as the Saxons. Arthur only agrees to cease hostilities against the Scots after a Scottish bishop has begged him to let those few of them still alive live on a small piece of land, in servitude. The bishop's petition moves Arthur, and he relents.<sup>538</sup> While it looks like it is the Christian character of the petition that leads Arthur to agree to peace, his cruelty towards the Scottish could be seen as remarkably unchristian. The balance between strong kingship and justice seems to be at stake here. Eric Stanley has summarised Western medieval notions of kingship as consisting of power combined with wisdom and "justice tempered by mercy." Crucially, good kingship had to be seen as a Christian ideal.<sup>539</sup> This is what makes Arthur's behaviour so remarkable at first sight. Nonetheless, I would argue that Geoffrey attempts to do two things here: firstly, to show Arthur as first and foremost a fierce battle-leader, the strong leader he felt was necessary at the time. Secondly, in the light of what has been

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<sup>535</sup> ll. 20–22, 9.6.

<sup>536</sup> Ll. 164–166, Liber IX, 201.

<sup>537</sup> Book 9, 200.

<sup>538</sup> L. 150, Liber IV, 201.

<sup>539</sup> Eric Stanley, "The Political Notion of Kingship in *Laȝamon's Brut*", in *Reading Laȝamon's Brut: Approaches and Explorations*, ed. Rosamund Allen, Jane Roberts, Carole Weinberg (New York: Brill, 2013), 123.

discussed so far, I think it is possible that in emphasising the Scots as subordinate to the Britons Geoffrey tries to reposition the early medieval Scots as the twelfth-century Welsh. In other words, he demotes the Scots so the Welsh can be saved from their lowly image.

Geoffrey repositions both Arthur's enemies and his allies in order to appeal to those in power. For instance, Arthur has his closest allies in the rulers of Brittany, at a time when Henry I had been trying to ally himself with the duchy.<sup>540</sup> A much more ambiguous role is given to the Romans in the text. After Arthur has conquered all of Europe (some countries through fighting, others through his reputation), and his realm has been at peace for over a decade, he receives a letter from Lucius, procurator of the Republic. Lucius calls the king's behaviour tyrannical, and demands tribute to be paid, as according to the Romans Britain has been a vassal state since the invasion by Julius Caesar.<sup>541</sup> Cador, Duke of Cornwall, is the first to reply after having heard the letter read out, and expresses contentment that the Britons can once more prove themselves on the battlefield. The many years of peace, he claims, have "tainted with slackness" (*ignauia commaculet*)<sup>542</sup> all those qualities, such as courage and honour, that the Britons were known for.<sup>543</sup> Indeed, the years of peace had led to changes within society itself:

Ad tantum etenim statum dignitatis Britannia tunc reducta erat quod copia diuitiarum, luxu ornamentorum, facetia incolarum cetera regna excellebat.<sup>544</sup>

So noble was Britain then that it surpassed other kingdoms in its stores of wealth, the ostentation of its dress and the sophistication of its dress and the sophistication of its inhabitants.<sup>545</sup>

Cador's comments, however, highlight a tension that requires further scrutiny. It is a tension that was also present in pre-Conquest literature, again most notably in *Beowulf*: on the one hand, a king had to provide peace and security, while on the other he had to be able to reward his retainers through conquest and war. In the *Historia*, the Romans

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<sup>540</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 10.

<sup>541</sup> Ll. 415–431, Liber IX, 215.

<sup>542</sup> L. 442, Liber IX, 217.

<sup>543</sup> Book 9, 216.

<sup>544</sup> Ll. 385–387, Liber IX, 213.

<sup>545</sup> Book 9, 212.

embody this tension. They are the enemies, and yet also the society and empire after which Arthur models his own. When Arthur gives a speech to his men after having read Lucius' letter, he first stresses the importance of wisdom as crucial to any reaction they will give to the Romans.<sup>546</sup> He then discusses Caesar's conquest of Britain:

Dicit enim ipsum sibi dari debere quia Iulio Caesari ceterisque successoribus suis redditum fuerit, qui discidio ueterum nostrorum inuitati cum armata manu applicuerunt: atque patriam domesticis motibus vacillantem suae potestati vi et uolentia summiserunt. Quia igitur eam hoc modo eam adepti fuerunt, uectigal ex illa iniuste ceperunt. Nichil enim quod ui et uolentia acquiritur iuste ab ullo possidetur qui uolentiam intulit.<sup>547</sup>

He claims that he ought to receive it on the grounds that it was paid to Julius Caesar and his successors, who landed with an army after being called in because of dissent on our ancestors' part, and who by force of arms subjected our country to their power, when it was weakened by eternal strife. Because they obtained it by these means, the tribute they exacted from us was unjust. What is obtained by force of arms is never the rightful possession of the aggressor.<sup>548</sup>

The Romans are portrayed as abusers of Britain's weakness. It is very possible that a contemporary audience would have been reminded of the not too distant Norman Conquest. The idea that civil discord led to the Roman invasion does not occur in Gildas or 'Nennius.' Neither text makes any mention of previous disunity resulting in an invasion. Why does Geoffrey have Arthur speak these words? One possibility is that it foreshadows the downfall of Arthur's own kingdom after the rebellion by his nephew Mordred. I suggest, however, that there is another motive. As Geoffrey aims to position Arthurian, and by extension Welsh, 'history' within the historical framework of the Anglo-Norman rulers, he looks to the theme of domestic treachery and dissension as precursors to a kingdom's downfall. Treachery and dissension, as discussed in the previous chapters, are the result of a breaking down of the relationship between the king

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<sup>546</sup> This is a very different side to the Arthur we have seen so far.

<sup>547</sup> Ll. 456–462, Liber IX, 217.

<sup>548</sup> Book 9, 216.

and his people. They therefore feature prominently in Geoffrey's work. The fall of Troy, the starting point for the foundation myth of Britain, is itself predicated on both heroic actions and treachery, as Abigail Wheatley has noted. She adds that this "dual example, of heroic success and of failure through treachery, echoes the dynamics of social relations in contemporary cities, where co-operation between the different groups within the class hierarchy was the ideal, even though conflict and mistrust might be the reality."<sup>549</sup> Cooperation was therefore crucial for both the creation and continued stability of the realm.

The text's concerns around treachery and cooperation are also connected to Geoffrey's secondary aim: cooperation between the Welsh and the Anglo-Norman elite. Disunity leads to a weakening of the political system, and this may present a hint of what Geoffrey fears the strife between Matilda and Stephen might lead to. Geoffrey's Romans are the catalyst that reveals the tension between heroic actions (demonstrated by Arthur and his men when fighting the Romans) and civil disunity, which is allowed to grow due to Arthur's long absence from England in order to fight them. Thus, Arthur's final words in the passage above, concerning 'rightful possession,' can be seen as hypocritical. However, I would suggest that his words should not be taken generally but in their specific context, following his previous statements. The problem is not that the Romans seized Britain (as indeed Arthur has done to other kingdoms), but that they seized it "*by these means*," i.e. abusing the fact that the people were divided and locked in civil discord. This is the violence that, according to Arthur, means the Romans did not hold Britain legally — they did not conquer through their own strength, as Arthur had done, but through opportunism. This interpretation also fits with the embedding of Britain's foundation myth in Trojan history: the Trojans too were not defeated by an opponent's might in an honest battle, but through deceit. As a descendent of the Trojan Brutus, Arthur makes clear that this is not honourable behaviour, and that disunity can have grave consequences.

The portrayal of the Romans as abusive and dishonourable enemies may sit uncomfortably with the fact that the Anglo-Normans, the people Geoffrey aimed to reach, emulated the Romans through building works, insignia, seals, and various other aspects of their culture.<sup>550</sup> The solution, I suggest, can be found in the distinction Geoffrey appears to make between the Romans as rulers in Britain and the Romans in Rome. As

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<sup>549</sup> Wheatley, *The Idea of the Castle*, 45.

<sup>550</sup> Wheatley, *The Idea of the Castle*, 130.

soon as they have conquered Britain, Geoffrey treats them as rulers of Britain, and they are absorbed into its history. Indeed, Arthur's queen, Guinevere, is specifically mentioned to be "ex nobili genere Romanorum"<sup>551</sup> (a woman of noble Roman ancestry).<sup>552</sup> Like the Romans the Normans invaded at a time of disunity in Britain but, considering his audience and the way the Romans are portrayed throughout the text, I suggest that Geoffrey carefully positioned the idea that, as the Romans before them, the Normans have been integrated into Britain's history. The result is a historical framework into which new rulers and people can be absorbed.

This idea of integration is exemplified in one particularly telling scene in the *Historia*. Several scholars have commented on Geoffrey's approach to historiography, and have noted that Geoffrey does not explain the change of leadership in Britain by citing "providential Christian theology."<sup>553</sup> Rather, in the case of the Britons and the Saxons, he makes clear that this is due to treachery from within the kingdom itself. It is Arthur's nephew Mordred who rises against him. After their deaths, Mordred's sons ally themselves with the Saxons to overthrow the new British king, Constantine.<sup>554</sup> While the British line continued to rule for a while after, their power was clearly in decline.<sup>555</sup> At a crucial moment in this history, Geoffrey addresses his audience directly:

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<sup>551</sup> Ll. 209–210, Liber IX, 205.

<sup>552</sup> Book 9, 204.

<sup>553</sup> Robert Hanning, "Inescapable history: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* and Arthurian romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries", in *Romance and History: Imagining Time from the Medieval to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2015) 56. See also William Leckie Jr, *The passage of dominion: Geoffrey of Monmouth and the periodization of insular history in the twelfth century*.

<sup>554</sup> Liber XI, 253–255.

<sup>555</sup> An interesting comparison can be made here with Richard of Devizes' annals. As many historians of the twelfth century, such as Geoffrey Gaimar, Richard uses Geoffrey's *Historia*. However, as John Gillingham has noted, Richard reworks Geoffrey's depiction of the passage of power from Britons to Saxons very differently. In Richard's work, Arthur strikes a deal with the Saxon Cerdic (a historical King of Wessex and ancestor of King Alfred), to divide Britain up, and Mordred then grants even more land to Cerdic. Thus, "he explicitly turned Mordred's and Arthur's grants into the foundation of Wessex, and hence of England itself" (148). Moreover, Richard describes Hengist and Horsa as descendents of a British king, and so their arrival in Britain is changed into a return to the land of their forefathers. In this way, Gillingham argues, Richard interweaves the history of the Saxons and the Britons and as such "claimed dynastic continuity between British and English kings" (149). What Geoffrey tries to do with Norman and Angevin leadership, namely to place them within British history as rulers indebted to Arthur, as I will discuss later, Richard decides to do for the Cerdicings, the royal line of King Alfred. John Gillingham, "Richard of Devizes and 'a rising tide of nonsense'", in *The Long*



Quid, ociosa gens pondere inmanium scelerum oppressa, quid semper ciuilia proelia siciens, tete domesticis in tantum debilitasti motibus, quae cum prius longe posita regna potestati tuae subdidessis nunc uelut bona uinea degenerata in amaritudinem uersa patriam, coniuges, liberos nequeas ab inimicis tueri? Age ergo, age ciuile discidiu, parum intelligens euangelicum illud ‘omne regnum in se ipsum diuisum desolabitur, et domus supra domum cadet.’ Quia ergo regnum tuum in se diuisum fuit, quia furor ciuilis discordiae et liuoris fumus mentem tuam hebetauit, quia superbia tua uni regi oboedientiam ferre non permisit, cernis iccirco patriam tuam ab impiis paganis desolatam, domos etiam eiusdem supra domos ruentes, quod posterius tui in futurum lugebunt.<sup>556</sup>

Why, you slothful race, weighed down by your terrible sins, why with your continual thirst for civil war have you weakened yourself so much by internal strife? You once subjected far-off realms to your power, but are now unable to protect your land, wifes and children from your foes, so that you resemble a vineyard once good, but now turned sour. Go on, wage your civil war, unmindful that in the gospel it says: ‘every kingdom divided against itself shall be laid waste, and house fall on house.’ Your kingdom is divided against itself, lust for civil strife and a cloud of envy has blunted your mind, your pride has prevented you from obeying a single king, and so your country has been laid waste before your eyes by most wicked barbarians, and its houses fall one upon another.<sup>557</sup>

While the initial target of Geoffrey’s anger may seem to be the Britons he has been writing about, he is also appealing to his contemporary audience. His warning may well have resonated with an audience beginning to understand the devastation a civil war between Empress Matilda and King Stephen would bring to the country, and the divisions which will only weaken a king and his authority. Geoffrey uses the downfall of the British royal line and the take-over by the Saxons to issue warnings about similar divisions after the

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*Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past*, ed. Martin Brett and D.A. Woodman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 141–156.

<sup>556</sup> Ll. 141–152, Liber XI, 257.

<sup>557</sup> Book 11, 256.

death of Henry I, without referring to divine providence as Gildas had done. By making this comparison, Geoffrey integrates Norman and Welsh history and makes it Britain's history. In a sense, then, for Geoffrey the past becomes a malleable tool to hold up a mirror to the present, a present which calls for cooperation and unity. This integration of Welsh and Norman can be seen in one further telling example. After Arthur has conquered France, he travels back to England and

affectauit curiam ilico tenere regnique diadema capiti suo imponere, reges etiam et duces sibi subditos ad ipsam festiuitatem conuocare, ut et illam ueneralibiter celebraret et inter procures suos firmissimam pacem renouaret.<sup>558</sup>

decided to hold court immediately, wearing the royal crown upon his head, and summoned the kings and dukes subject to him to the same ceremony, to mark it solemnly and to establish lasting peace among his nobles.<sup>559</sup>

After listing all the leaders who came to pay Arthur homage, Geoffrey continues “sollemnitate instante archipraesules ad palacium ducuntur ut regem diademate regali coronent.”<sup>560</sup> (on the day of the festival the archbishops were led to the palace to place the royal diadem upon the king's head.)<sup>561</sup> This is only the beginning of the coronation scene which Geoffrey describes so vividly. As Arthur had already been crowned at age fifteen, it is worth considering why Geoffrey includes this elaborate scene. Second coronations in themselves were not uncommon, as several Anglo-Norman and Angevin kings are known to have been crowned more than once, in a bid to reassert their authority.<sup>562</sup> Robert Hanning has noted that the coronation scene as described here is “... an Anglo-Norman royal ritual appropriated for the Britons by Geoffrey.”<sup>563</sup> The scene is, therefore, a symbol of the integration and cooperation Geoffrey wishes to promote between the Welsh and the Anglo-Normans.

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<sup>558</sup> Ll. 307–310, Liber IX, 209.

<sup>559</sup> Book 11, 208.

<sup>560</sup> Ll. 356–357, Liber IX, 211.

<sup>561</sup> Book 9, 210.

<sup>562</sup> For instance, kings Richard I and Stephen had second coronations, and King John had three. See: Daniell, *From Norman Conquest to Magna Carta*, 80.

<sup>563</sup> Hanning, “Inescapable history”, 59.

I would argue, however, that the scene has wider significance if we consider its contexts. Geoffrey writes that there was “Praeter hos non remansit princeps alicuius precii citra Hispaniam, quin ad istud edictum ueniret.”<sup>564</sup> (there was no prince worth his salt this side of Spain who did not answer such a call).<sup>565</sup> The peaceful presence of all these leaders underscores the importance of Geoffrey’s later warnings about unity under one king. The time Arthur chooses to hold his plenary court is of greater importance, however. Whitsun itself was an important moment in the Anglo-Norman crown-wearing calendar. It should be noted that wearing a crown as an assertion of authority was not an Anglo-Norman invention —Edward the Confessor was said to have worn his crown at special festive occasions.<sup>566</sup> However, the locations coupled to the timing of the ceremonies are reminiscent of the traditions began by William the Conqueror, who was known, for instance, to wear his crown three times a year, one of them at Whitsuntide, which is the setting of Arthur’s second coronation. In addition, Arthur chooses to perform these ceremonies and celebrations just after having conquered France. Geoffrey informs us that Arthur gave several French provinces away, but only names two: Normandy, which passes to his cupbearer, Bedevere, and Anjou, which is handed over to his seneschal, Kay. The specific mention of these two provinces is significant. Geoffrey emphasises here the ultimate authority Arthur exercised, namely the authority to give land away to his faithful retainers. More crucially, the two provinces named are those from which the Norman and Angevin dynasties hail. Geoffrey, then, not only underscores Arthur’s power, but also wishes to remind his (elite) twelfth-century audience that a British king once ruled their homelands. In this way Geoffrey stresses that the links between Britons (or Welsh), Normans, and Angevins are closer than the new Anglo-Norman and Angevin elite in England might have suspected, and that the Welsh deserve more respect than they have hitherto received. With Bedevere as duke of Normandy and Kay as duke of Anjou, Geoffrey sketches Britain’s future and suggests that the power of these duchies’ leaders is due to King Arthur’s past largesse. The coronation scene, where the two new dukes are also present to pay homage to King Arthur, thus demonstrates the close ties between Britons, Normans, and Angevins, and is Geoffrey’s way of reminding his audience to whom they owe their privileged positions.

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<sup>564</sup> Ll. 353–354, Liber IX, 211.

<sup>565</sup> Book 9, 210.

<sup>566</sup> R.J. Maddicott, *The Origins of the English Parliament, 924–1327* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 43.

The relationship between Arthur and his men is emphasised in several more places in the text, and the treatment of the relationship between lord and retainer bears resemblance to the one described in *Beowulf*. When Arthur travels to save Helena, the niece of his ally Hoel of Brittany, from a terrible giant, he decides to leave without his companions, only taking Bedevere and Kay to confront the creature. Geoffrey justifies this decision as follows:

Tanta namque uirtute praeualendo, negligebat contra talia monstra exercitum ducere, cum et suos hoc modo inanimaret et solus ad illa destruenda sufficeret.<sup>567</sup>

So mighty a warrior as Arthur was unwilling to lead his army against such a monster, as he could destroy it single-handed and wanted to encourage his troops by doing so.<sup>568</sup>

This passage is reminiscent of Beowulf's decision to confront the dragon without his men, at the end of the poem. However, whereas Beowulf's decision leads to his death, Geoffrey here intends to demonstrate Arthur's great courage. The obvious difference is of course the fact that Beowulf was an old man when he faced the dragon, and seemingly unaware of the fact that his strength had waned. Nonetheless, another difference shows the important dynamic between a lord and his retainers. Beowulf thinks he can fight the dragon alone and wishes to prove himself for the sake of his own glory, breaking the bond of mutual dependency between a lord and his men. Arthur, on the other hand, specifically desires to inspire his men: it is not just that he is capable of defeating the giant himself; he is conscious of the effect this decision will likely have on his men. He hopes to set a positive example. It should be kept in mind, of course, that Beowulf as king was, as I argued in chapter one, very uncomfortable in his role. Arthur had reigned from the age of fifteen, and so his heroic actions had always been performed as king, and in the service of his people. Arthur's decision shows an interesting and more complex dynamic between cooperation and showing one's individual valour.

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<sup>567</sup> Ll. 41–43, Liber X, 225.

<sup>568</sup> Book 10, 224.

Indeed, the relationship Geoffrey portrays between Arthur and his men is close to the ideal relationship as propagated by the Alfredian Group. This ideal relationship was one that centred on cooperation, and acknowledgement of the fact that a good relationship was beneficial for both lord and retainers. Significantly, the underlying idea is that a strong personal relationship is not just good for the individuals involved, but also crucial for the well-being of the realm. If subjects did not obey or show loyalty to the king, and if the king did not listen to his advisers and practised wisdom, then the consequences could be disastrous.<sup>569</sup> While the focus on law-making, which emerged as key element of royal authority in the Alfredian Group, is not overtly present yet in Geoffrey's *Arthuriad*,<sup>570</sup> Geoffrey's interest in loyalty and the importance of seeking advice takes shape in a way Alfred could have approved of. As we have seen, Geoffrey opens his *Arthuriad* with a description of the king as courageous and generous, and I have argued that, contrary to the general image of Geoffrey as uninterested in interpersonal relationships, he is indeed very interested in these matters. It is an interest, however, that is more generalised and wrapped in ideas than what we encounter in Wace and Layamon. Geoffrey does not explicitly describe the kind of relationships Arthur has with his family and loyal retainers. What he does, however, is show us the importance of good relationships through Arthur's actions and speeches. These scenes demonstrate that Geoffrey, like the Alfredian writers, understands loyalty and cooperation as key factors in maintaining the balance of the reciprocal relationship between a king and his men.

Several scenes in the *Arthuriad* provide examples of this relationship. In his speech to his men before they fight the Romans, Arthur makes clear what the duty of his warriors is.

Quantos honores quisque uestrum possidebit si uoluntati meae atque praeceptis meis ut fideles commilitones adqueueritis! Subiugatis etenim ipsis, continuo

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<sup>569</sup> In chapter 2, for instance, we saw that Alfred attributed the continued destructions by Vikings as examples of a relationship between king and his men that was out of balance.

<sup>570</sup> Legal matters only really come to the fore in the later versions of Arthur's exploits, and become central to good kingship in later literary texts, as I will discuss in the subchapter dealing with Layamon and in the next chapter. Nonetheless, twelfth-century chroniclers were very much occupied with the law, especially pre-Conquest law. William of Malmesbury and Richard of Devizes, for instance, both admiringly discuss Alfred's legal interests. As Bruce O'Brien has noted, the Conquest did not have a major impact on the law (Bruce O'Brien, "Authority and Community", 82.)

Romam petemus, petitam capiemus, captam autem possidebimus, et sic aurum, argentum, palatia, turre, oppida, ciuitates, et ceteras uictorum diuitias habetitis.<sup>571</sup>

What rewards you will obtain if, like faithful comrades, you obey my wishes and commands! Once the enemy is defeated, we shall march on Rome, capture it and take it over, so that you shall have gold, silver, palaces, towers, castles, cities and all the spoils of victory.<sup>572</sup>

This is only a small part of the speech, but Arthur's words here are illuminating. He tells his men that riches are gained through unquestioning obedience, which is in keeping with Geoffrey's remarks on Arthur's character earlier on. Arthur's generosity was highlighted through his defeat of the Saxons, whose wealth he then used to reward his loyal men. Geoffrey emphasises this point when he adds that this is the kind of behaviour expected of loyal warriors. The addition that this is what 'loyal' soldiers ought to do demonstrates the value Arthur attaches to the relationship he has with his men. The rest of the passage above consists of Arthur showing his men what happens when that relationship is maintained as it should be: victory in battle means loyalty can be rewarded with magnificent treasures.

Another key element in a well-balanced relationship between lord and men is the king's duty to ask his most trusted men for advice. As Robert Bartlett has argued, assemblies were crucial for maintaining a good relationship and were usually the place where cooperation and advice were sought. He notes, for instance, that most of Henry I's 'dynastic arrangements' were made at assemblies. When Henry neglected to do this, for instance when he had his daughter Matilda marry Geoffrey of Anjou, it caused resentment amongst the aristocracy. In theory, "...it was an assumption of the ideal of good lordship, which the king shared, that lords would seek advice from their men."<sup>573</sup> Usually, it seems like the king did indeed listen to his advisers.<sup>574</sup> In the *Arthurian*, Geoffrey shows that seeking advice is a crucial feature of good kingship. Early in his reign, Arthur besieges

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<sup>571</sup> Ll. 285–289, Liber X, 237.

<sup>572</sup> Book 10, 236.

<sup>573</sup> Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 145.

<sup>574</sup> Bartlett, *England*, 146.

the Saxons in York. His advisers learn that one of the Saxon leaders is bringing back reinforcements from Germany, and advise him to end the siege. Geoffrey writes that

Paruit igitur Arturus domesticorum suorum consilio recepitque sese infra urbem Lundoniarum. Ibi conuocato clero et primatibus tocius potestatis suae, quaerit consilium quid optimum quidue saluberrimum contra paganorum irruptionem faceret.<sup>575</sup>

Arthur deferred to the views of his retainers and retired to London. There he gathered all the clergy and nobles of the realm to ask what was the best and safest course to adopt against the enemy invasion.<sup>576</sup>

Then, based on common policy, they decide what to do. Geoffrey slows down his narrative of war and battle here to linger on strategy, a strategy which is founded on cooperation and counsel. Geoffrey shows that Arthur takes both secular and religious wisdom seriously, as he does not only ask his retainers for advice but also his bishops. Nor is Arthur's search for advice due to his young age and inexperience in matters of war. Many years later, when Arthur's Empire has been established and the letter from Rome arrives, Arthur opens his speech by imploring his retainers to work together and provide guidance.

‘Conoscii’ inquit ‘prosperitatis et aduersitatis, quorum probitates hactenus et in dandis consiliis et in militiis agendis expertus sum, adhibete nunc unanimiter sensus uestros et sapienter praeuidete quae super talibus mandatis nobis agenda esse noueritis.’<sup>577</sup>

‘You, my companions in succes and adversity, whose worth has thus far been proven to me in council and on the battlefield, now consider together and make wise provision for our response to such demands.’<sup>578</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> Ll. 47–50, Liber IX, 195.

<sup>576</sup> Book 9, 194.

<sup>577</sup> Ll. 448–451, Liber IX, 217.

<sup>578</sup> Book 9, 216.

I suggest it is significant that Geoffrey opens Arthur's speech not with talk of war, battle, and revenge, but with calm and an appeal to past endeavours which have yielded close relationships. It is based on these relationships that Arthur and his men decide to go to war against the Romans. While Geoffrey is certainly very interested in war and warriors, I have argued here that this does not negate a strong underlying interest in interpersonal relationships. Indeed, as the examples above have shown, Geoffrey depicts these reciprocal relationships as fundamental for success in battle. Geoffrey's *Arthuriad*, then, portrays royal power as a matter of courage and prowess in battle, while demonstrating at the same time that a king who does not take his relationship with his men seriously cannot expect to be successful in war. Additionally, Arthur's authority as king is linked to Geoffrey's own contemporary context, as Arthur becomes a symbol for unity and cooperation. The fact that the only two duchies he gives away (or mentions) are Normandy and Anjou exemplifies this link to the twelfth century, when the Norman rulers became connected to the Angevin ducal house through Matilda's marriage to Geoffrey of Anjou. Geoffrey aims, as many have argued, to elevate the reputation of the Britons (or Welsh), the people he identified with and who were about to play an important part in the Anarchy. However, as this exploration of Arthur's royal authority has shown, his aims were wider than that. Geoffrey did not simply intend to boost a reputation, but to forge new and lasting relationships between the Anglo-Norman (and Angevin) elite and the British. Arthur became the symbol of such cooperation and unity, as a king who showed that 'our' side is the side of the Kings of Britain, whatever their ethnicity.

Indeed, Geoffrey's portrayal of Arthur provided possibilities for his further politicisation by later writers. As Christopher Berard has noted, "Geoffrey had crafted Arthur in such a way that the figure could function as a legitimizing precedent for Anglo-Norman imperialism."<sup>579</sup> The legendary king's malleability, then, served the Angevin dynasty, and Wace in particular used Arthur to bolster the authority of Henry II. Perhaps most importantly, Geoffrey's *Historia* provided precedent for the belief that a new Arthur did not have to be a Briton. Instead, he "had laid a foundation for believing that the crown and the land itself conferred a measure of spiritual connection and continuity that stretched across cultural and dynastic change."<sup>580</sup> This proved to be particularly useful for those authors who wrote specifically for a king, such as Wace.

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<sup>579</sup> Berard, *Arthurianism*, 17.

<sup>580</sup> Berard, *Arthurianism*, 303.



### 3.3. Wace's *Brut*

To further understand the representation of Arthur and his kingship, and how Geoffrey's story and conceptions of kingship were adapted, I will now turn to the *Roman de Brut* by Wace. As Curley has noted, Geoffrey "was the channel through which the Arthurian matter passed to Wace."<sup>581</sup> While Geffrei Gaimar had already included Arthur, though briefly, in his Norman French chronicle *Estoire des Engleis*,<sup>582</sup> Wace's *Roman de Brut* provides "the first sustained account of his life in any vernacular language."<sup>583</sup> While not as many copies of the *Brut* survive as of Geoffrey's *Historia*, its thirty-two manuscripts and fragments constitute a solid base for scholarship on the dissemination of and emendations to Wace's text.<sup>584</sup> In addition to the poem's manuscript context, the literary and historical contexts are telling too, especially considering Wace's other historical work, the *Roman de Rou*, a history of the Norman dukes. As Judith Green has remarked, this poem gives interesting insights into the reign of Henry I, especially concerning the struggles over Normandy with the king's brother, Robert Curthose.<sup>585</sup> The poem ends in the year 1106 with the Battle of Tinchebray, a battle which was a victory for Henry and reunited Normandy and England under his crown for almost thirty years.<sup>586</sup> In the *Rou* as well as the *Brut*, then, Wace reflects concerns with legitimate kingship, and aims to present the king with a history useful for claiming his authority over both England and Normandy.

Written approximately twenty years after Geoffrey had finished his *Historia*, Wace's French octosyllabic couplets opened the story of the earliest kings of Britain to a whole new — and larger — audience, one not literate in Latin.<sup>587</sup> Layamon, his successor, tells us that Wace presented his *Brut* to the new Queen of England, Eleanor of

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<sup>581</sup> Curley, *Geoffrey of Monmouth*, ix. Wace used as the 'base text' the first Variant Version of the *Historia* (Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XVIII).

<sup>582</sup> Intriguingly, as Francoise Le Saux has noted, all extant copies of Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* are found alongside Wace's work. "Matter of Britain", 133.

<sup>583</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XI.

<sup>584</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XXV. See Weiss also for an overview of these manuscripts and editorial decisions made in the process of translation.

<sup>585</sup> Judith A. Green, *Henry I: King of England and Duke of Normandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8.

<sup>586</sup> Green, *Henry I*, 94.

<sup>587</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XVIII.

Aquitaine.<sup>588</sup> As previously noted, this may well have been due to the Queen's known interest in Arthurian tales. In stating his aims Wace makes it clear in his opening lines that he has a wider audience in mind:

Ki vult oïr e vult saveir  
 De rei en rei e d'eir en eir  
 Ki cil furent e dunt il vindrent  
 Ki Engleterre primes tendrent,  
 Quels reis i ad en ordre eü,  
 E qui ancis e ki puis fu,  
 Maistre Wace l'ad translaté  
 Ki en conte la verité.<sup>589</sup> (ll. 1–8)

Whoever wishes to hear and to know about the successive kings and their heirs who once upon a time were the rulers of England—who they were, whence they came, what was their sequence, who came earlier and who later—Master Wace has translated it and tells it truthfully.<sup>590</sup>

Despite his intended wider audience, Wace's representation of Arthurian royal authority was influenced by his connections with the court of Henry II and Eleanor. It was constructed with a royal audience in mind, as Wace uses Arthur as an example of kingship to be emulated. While Wace's version in this respect does not differ from Geoffrey's as much as Layamon does from either of the other two, the *Brut* does demonstrate a particular interest in royal authority that is distinct from the one depicted in the *Historia*. It may be significant that the political contexts at the time of writing were very different for Geoffrey and Wace. Whereas the *Historia* saw the light of day during the troubles of succession, and witnessed the end of the Norman royal line and expressed uncertainty about the future, Wace was writing at the birth of a new dynasty: the Angevins. Wace was also not invested in improving the image of the Welsh. Based on extensive research on manuscripts of the *Brut*, Le Saux argues that, at least in England, the *Brut* was mainly

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<sup>588</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XII.

<sup>589</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 2.

<sup>590</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 3.

seen as a historical work, or alternatively as a kind of ‘travel guide,’ a handbook for the Normans to their newly conquered kingdom.<sup>591</sup> The manuscripts also indicate that the text’s readership had a specific interest in Arthurian stories.<sup>592</sup> According to Weiss, Wace’s audience was a lay one, and less comfortable with (or interested in) Classical literature.<sup>593</sup> As far as Wace’s own aims are concerned, he appears to have intended to inform the Angevins about their new kingdom. The text is presented to Eleanor as a guide to her new country. However, I argue that Wace did not merely wish to inform his royal audience, but also to inspire them to recreate their own court and authority based on Arthur’s. This ideal of royal power in Wace retains, as Weiss has noted, some of Geoffrey’s heroic and epic elements, but also connects with the later twelfth-century move towards romance.<sup>594</sup> I will argue that Wace’s Arthur is important because, like Geoffrey, he is a symbol of a particular idea of royal authority. Whereas Geoffrey’s Arthur symbolises the hoped-for return of the Britons to a political and social level where they were equals, and where cooperation was central for a kingdom’s welfare, Wace’s Arthur reflects kingship in transition. He is an attempt to marry the past to the present, and constitutes a vision of kingship that would guide the new Angevin dynasty in the future. Arthur’s description and behaviour in the *Brut* shine a light on this aim. He becomes a king who may seem ambivalent at first, but who shows his (royal) audience that the characteristics of a good king are all founded in moderate and sensible behaviour.

### 3.3.1. Arthur in Wace’s *Brut*

Wace’s opening description of Arthur shows similarities with Geoffrey, but also differs in significant (but perhaps not obvious) ways. Wace skilfully marries pre-Conquest and Angevin ideals of kingship.

Juvenels esteit de quinze anz,  
De sun eage fors e granz.  
Les thecches Artur vis dirrai,  
Neient ne vus en mentirai;  
Chevaliers fu mult vertuus,

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<sup>591</sup> Le Saux, “Matter of Britain”, 133.

<sup>592</sup> Le Saux, “Matter of Britain”, 135.

<sup>593</sup> Weiss, *Wace’s Roman de Brut*, XX.

<sup>594</sup> Weiss, *Wace’s Roman de Brut*, XXIII.

Mult fu peisanz, mult gloriuz;  
 Cuntre orguilles fu orguilles  
 E cuntre humbles dulz e pitus;  
 Forz e hardiz e conqueranz,  
 Large dunere e dependanz;  
 E se busuinnus le requist,  
 S'aidier li pout, ne l'escundist.  
 Mult ama preis, mult ama gloire,  
 Mult volt ses faiz mettre en memoire,  
 Servir se fist curteisement  
 Si se cuntint mult noblement.  
 Tant cum il vesqui e regna  
 Tuz altres princes surmunta  
 De curtesie e de noblesce  
 E de vertu e de largesce.<sup>595</sup> (ll. 9013–9032).

He was a young man of fifteen, tall and strong for his age. I will tell you about Arthur's qualities and not lie to you. He was a most mighty knight, admirable and renowned, proud to the haughty and gentle and compassionate to the humble. He was strong, bold and invincible, a generous giver and spender, and if he could help someone in need, he would not refuse him. He greatly loved renown and glory, he greatly wished his deeds to be remembered. He behaved most nobly and saw to it that he was served with courtesy. For as long as he lived and reigned, he surpassed all other monarchs in courtesy and nobility, generosity and power.<sup>596</sup>

Like Geoffrey, Wace tells of Arthur's courage and generosity. The picture, however, is both extended and complicated, and as a result Arthur here is more ambivalent than in the *Historia*.<sup>597</sup> Wace's description of Arthur reads like a finely tuned balance between pre-Conquest heroic kingship and the more recent development of courtly ideals. For

<sup>595</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 226.

<sup>596</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 227.

<sup>597</sup> Weiss, "Wace to Layamon via Waldef", 547.

example, Wace moves directly from stating Arthur's desire for love and glory and a wish to be remembered after death to describing his noble and courteous behaviour. Indeed, when it comes to references to Arthur's courtly behaviour, the final two sentences appear to be rather repetitive. I suggest, however, that the last sentence should be read as a summary. After listing the king's numerous qualities, Wace wishes his audience to remember four of his virtues in particular: "courtesy and nobility, generosity and power" (de curteisie a de noblesce/ E de vertu e de largesce, ll. 9031-9032). The word 'curteis' does not occur in the *Historia*, and may at times "mean no more than being a skilled soldier and displaying the largesse essential to any epic leader."<sup>598</sup> In other places, however, "it seems an adjective associated with the accomplishments valued in peacetime...."<sup>599</sup>, such as sport and music. I suggest that, in the passage above, it has the latter meaning. I argue that Wace consciously positions courtesy and nobility as separate entities from generosity and power.<sup>600</sup> As I have discussed above, Geoffrey focuses on generosity and courage; for him, kingship is a combination of these traditional qualities, to be demonstrated principally on the battlefield. Wace adds courtesy and nobility, and now both the traditional and new qualities are to be found in one man. Wace positions Arthur as a king who is halfway between then and now, and who therefore can serve both well. Indeed, Le Saux has noted how Wace reshapes the narrative to "project the image of a stern but merciful ruler."<sup>601</sup> The result may appear to be ambivalent, as Weiss has described it,<sup>602</sup> because it displays a notion of kingship that embraces seemingly conflicting characteristics. I suggest that the Arthur Wace presents is not ambivalent, but rather demonstrates that good kings can exhibit these seemingly conflicting qualities as long as they are tempered by moderation. In this sense Wace is in agreement with another twelfth-century historian, William of Malmesbury. Björn Weiler has noted that, according to Malmesbury, King Stephen failed because "his excessive exercise of virtues turned them into vices."<sup>603</sup> Likewise, Robert Curthose lost the throne because he valued

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<sup>598</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XXIII.

<sup>599</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, XXIII.

<sup>600</sup> For an overview of the rise of chivalry and what it entailed see: Richard W. Kaeuper, *Medieval Chivalry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 7–24.

<sup>601</sup> Françoise Le Saux, *A companion to Wace* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), 126.

<sup>602</sup> Weiss, "Wace to Layamon via Waldef", 547.

<sup>603</sup> Björn Weiler, "William of Malmesbury on Kingship", *History* 90 (January 2005): 18.

generosity and forgiveness above justice.<sup>604</sup> Wace's portrayal of Arthur shows a good king, not just because he possesses all the qualities of a good king, but especially because he maintains a balance between them. Arthur's virtues are never excessive.

Several scenes can be used as examples of Arthur's royal authority as founded on moderation in the *Brut*, but the scene detailing the aftermath of Arthur's defeat of the Scots is the most illuminating. Wace takes the scene from Geoffrey, but expands it considerably. Whereas Geoffrey briefly gives the bishops' plea, through indirect speech, Wace also includes the women; all together they appeal directly to Arthur.

Es vus evesques e abbez,  
 Muines e altres ordenez,  
 Cors sainz e reliques portant,  
 Pur les Escoz merci querant.  
 Es vus lé dames de cuntrees,  
 Tutes nu piez, eschevelees,  
 Lur vesteüres decirees  
 E lur chieres esgratinees,  
 En lur braz lur enfanz petiz;  
 Od pluremenz e od granz criz  
 As piez Artur tuit s'umilient,  
 Plurent e braient, merci crient:  
 'Sire, merci! Ce dient tuit;  
 Pur quei a cest païs destruit?  
 Aies merci des enterpris  
 Que tu, sire, de faim ocis.  
 Se tu nen as merci des peres,  
 Veies ces enfanz e ces meres,  
 Veies lur fiz, veies lur filles,  
 Veies lu genz que tu eissiles!  
 Les peres rend as petiz fiz,  
 E as meres rend lur mariz;  
 Rend a ces dames lur seinnurs

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<sup>604</sup> Björn Weiler, "William of Malmesbury", 18.

E les freres rend as sururs!  
 Assez avum espeneï  
 Que li Saissun passent par ci;  
 N'est giens par nostre volenté  
 Qu'il unt par cest païs passé.<sup>605</sup> (ll. 9465–9492)

Thereupon bishops, abbots, monks, and other priests appeared, carrying the remains and relics of saints, and asking for mercy on the Scots. And on the other side appeared the women of the land, their feet and heads quite bare, their clothes torn and their faces scratched, their little children in their arms. With tears and loud cries they all fell at Arthur's feet, weeping and wailing and begging for mercy. 'Mercy, my lord!' they all said. 'Why have you destroyed this land? Have mercy on those wretches whom you, my lord, are starving to death. If you don't have mercy on the fathers, then look at these children and their mothers. Look at their sons, their daughters, their families, ruined by you! Give fathers back to their little sons, husbands back to the mothers; give lords back to their ladies and brothers back to their sisters! We paid sufficient penalty when the Saxons came this way: it was no wish of ours that they should enter this land.'<sup>606</sup>

Wace's addition of the women and children, and more detailed description of the state the Scots have been reduced to, augments the extent of the suffering for the Scots. The first part of their collective speech details the relationships that have been damaged by Arthur, and the suffering they had already undergone due to their shared enemy, the Saxons. It is this sentiment that appears to prevail in the second half of the speech: the Scots did not expect good treatment from the Pagan Saxons, but Arthur and his men are Christians. Thus, they tell the king: "Mal nus unt fait, tu nus faiz pis" (They did us wrong; you do worse still, l. 9509.)<sup>607</sup> Wace adds more than just emotive language to this scene. While Geoffrey described Arthur as being reduced to tears and granting a pardon, based on their patriotism, Wace's Arthur responds differently:

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<sup>605</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 238.

<sup>606</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 239.

<sup>607</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 239.

Artur fu mult buens el desus;  
 De cel chaitif pople ot pitié  
 E des sainz cors e del clergié;  
 Vie e membre lur parduna,  
 Lur humages prist sis laissa.<sup>608</sup> (ll. 9522–9526)

In victory Arthur was magnanimous: he took pity on these wretched people and on the clergy with their holy relics. He spared them life and limb, received their homage and left them alone.<sup>609</sup>

Wace takes care to balance Arthur's initial cruel behaviour with forgiveness after he has won.<sup>610</sup> He does make the Scots recognise him as their overlord, but allows them to live in peace. Wace offsets Arthur's brutality and strength in war with mercy after triumph, harmonising these apparently contradictory characteristics of good kingship.

Two further additions in the *Brut* demonstrate Wace's particular concerns with kingship. Geoffrey mentions that, after defeating his nephew Mordred, Arthur passes his crown to Constantine, his cousin and son of the duke of Cornwall, Cador.<sup>611</sup> What is implied, but never overtly spoken of, is the fact that Arthur and Guinevere did not have children. From Geoffrey's point of view, this makes sense: he has to move to the domination of the Saxons, and the descendants of a great king do not fit in such a narrative. Wace, however, does comment on it, and in doing so indirectly connects Arthur's childlessness to the subsequent tragic events and defeat by the Saxons. He inserts his comments after stating Arthur had married Guinevere, who came from a noble Roman family, and who was not only beautiful but also courteous:

Artur l'ama mult e tient chiere;  
 Mais entr'els dous n'orent nul eir

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<sup>608</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 240.

<sup>609</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 241.

<sup>610</sup> This is notably where King John seems to have failed, as he enjoyed humiliating his opponents after he had defeated them. See: W.L. Warren, *King John* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961), 75–76.

<sup>611</sup> Ll. 80–84, Liber XI, 253.



Ne ne porent emfant aveir.<sup>612</sup> (ll. 9656–9658)

Arthur loved her deeply and held her very dear; but the two of them produced no heir nor could they have any children.<sup>613</sup>

While it is only a brief remark, it carries weight, not in the least because of the addition that they not only had no heir, but could not have any children at all. In pre-Conquest texts such as *Beowulf* a king who did not have children, as we have seen, potentially endangered his kingdom, especially if he did not clearly designate an heir during his lifetime. In addition, Wace makes the treachery by Mordred and Guinevere more forceful. Geoffrey narrates that Arthur's nephew Mordred took the crown during the King's absence and was living with Guinevere.<sup>614</sup> Wace, however, creates suspense by mentioning Mordred's disloyalty before the king leaves the country to fight:

Feme sun uncle par putage  
 Amat Modret si fist huntage.  
 A Modret e a la reïne,  
 Deus! tant mal fist cele saisine,  
 Comanda tut fors la corune.<sup>615</sup> (11185–11189)

Modret loved his uncle's wife shamefully and was dishonourable. To Modret and to the queen — alas! how unfortunate that he gave them possession! — Arthur entrusted everything but the crown.<sup>616</sup>

The seeds of betrayal have been sown before Arthur's departure, and all the king's great exploits abroad are now seen in the light of what is happening at home. The result is not just sympathy for Arthur but also, I propose, the realisation that all Arthur's actions to increase his dominion are futile; Mordred's disloyalty will unravel it all.

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<sup>612</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 243.

<sup>613</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 242.

<sup>614</sup> Ll. 480–484, Liber XI, 249.

<sup>615</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 282.

<sup>616</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 281.

One of these exploits abroad is Arthur's fight with the giant, as in the *Historia*. In the *Brut*, however, there is no sense of the king wishing to inspire his men by fighting the giant alone. Wace pictures the scene with an interesting practicality on the part of Arthur:

‘Jo irrai, dist Artur, avant,  
 Jo me combatrai al gaiant.  
 Vus vendrez enprés mei arriere  
 E bien gardez que nuls nel fiere  
 Tant cum jo me purrai aider,  
 Ne ja si jo n'en ai mestier.  
 Cuardie resemblereit  
 Se nuls fors mei s'i combatreit.  
 E nequedent, si vus veez  
 Mun busuin, si me sucurez.’<sup>617</sup> (ll. 11469–11478)

‘I will go ahead,’ said Arthur, ‘and fight the giant. You will follow me closely afterwards. Take care that no one strikes a blow, so long as I am able to help myself and so long as I don't need it. It would look like cowardice if anyone except me were to fight. Nevertheless, if you see I'm in need, help me.’<sup>618</sup>

Rather than aiming to inspire his men, Arthur is afraid that his reputation as great hero and warrior will suffer if he were to receive help. So far he is in line with the heroes of chapter one. However, the addition is significant: he does want help when it is absolutely necessary. Wace's Arthur appears to be of a more practical nature than Geoffrey's hero, indirectly acknowledging that, as king without heirs, he should not rush into danger.

Arthur's more practical nature in the *Brut* comes to the fore as well in the addition of the Round Table. He decides to have the table made because his barons all feel superior to one another, which causes disharmony at court:

Pur les nobles baruns qu'il out,  
 Dunt chescuns mielde estre quidout,

<sup>617</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 288.

<sup>618</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 289.

Chescuns se teneit al meillur,  
 Ne nuls n'en saveit le peiur,  
 Fist Artur la Runde Table  
 Dunt Bretun dient mainte fable.  
 Illuec seeient li vassal  
 Tuit chevalment e tuit egal;  
 A la table egalment seeient  
 E egalment servi esteient;<sup>619</sup> (ll. 9747–9756).

On account of his noble barons — each of whom felt he was superior, each considered himself the best, and no one could say who was the worst — Arthur had the Round Table made, about which the British tell many a tale. There sat the vassals, all equal, all leaders; they were placed equally round the table and equally served.<sup>620</sup>

This is an important indicator of Arthur's good kingship. Not only does he attract all these great vassals to his court, but he manages relationships between them and ensures harmony and peace. The depiction of Arthur's relationship with his men differs here in comparison with Geoffrey, but not as much as might be expected taking into account their different aims. I suggest that Arthur essentially has a different view of how to maintain the relationship with his men in the two texts. Geoffrey's Arthur is a more detached ruler, who keeps his men in check by inspiring them and rewarding them lavishly for their loyalty and courage. Wace's Arthur is a more closely involved king, not only concerned with his own relationship with his retainers, but also with the relationships *between* his retainers. In both texts, then, this relationship is important, but it is managed in different ways.

One last example serves to demonstrate Wace's intermediary position between Geoffrey's more heroic pre-Conquest Arthur and the Arthur of later courtly literature. Arthur's different style of kingship in the *Historia* is reflected by the actions of his nephew Gawain at the court of Lucius in Rome. Gawain allows himself to be agitated by the other young British knights and, after Lucius' nephew Gaius mutters an insult about

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<sup>619</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 244.

<sup>620</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 245.

the Britons' courage, Gawain "...euaginato ense quo accinctus erat, irruit in eum et eiusdem capite amputato ad equos cum sociis disgregitur."<sup>621</sup>(...drew the sword at his belt, attacked and beheaded Quintilianus and then returned to the horses with his companions).<sup>622</sup> This is a violent reaction to an insult, and it is not impossible to imagine Beowulf acting similarly. Wace handles the scene very differently, and Gawain, here called Walwein, is already an ambassador in Rome, and an experienced statesman. Here too Gawain's fellow knights attempt to persuade him to start a war but, as Martin Shichtman has noted, Gawain does not seem to heed them.<sup>623</sup> Sitting next to his uncle Lucius, Gaius (here called Quintilien), is described as a very proud man who openly insults the Britons:

‘Bretun, dist il, sunt vanteür  
 E mult sunt bon manaceür.  
 Vantances e manaces unt,  
 Assez manacent e poi funt.’  
 Encor, ço crei, avan parlast  
 E les messages rampodnast,  
 Mais Walwein, ki s’en coruça,  
 S’espee traist, avant passa,  
 Le chief li fist del bu voler;<sup>624</sup> (ll. 11745–11753).

‘Britons,’ he said, ‘are boasters and make some very fine threats. They’re all boasts and threats, they menace in plenty and do little.’ He would, I think, have spoken further and insulted the messengers, but Walwein, who was furious, drew his sword, rushed forward and made his head fly from his body.<sup>625</sup>

While the outcome is the same, Gawain's actions are presented as more understandable and noble by Wace. Quintilien does not mutter under his breath here, but directly offends

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<sup>621</sup> Ll. 127–128, Liber X, 229.

<sup>622</sup> Book 10, 228.

<sup>623</sup> Martin B. Shichtman, “Gawain in Wace and Layamon: A Case of Metahistorical Evolution”, in *Medieval Texts and Contemporary Readers*, ed. Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 112.

<sup>624</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 294.

<sup>625</sup> Weiss, *Wace's Roman de Brut*, 295.

the British knights. As Shichtman has argued, “Gawain kills Quintilian because the Roman has behaved badly and broken the protocol of diplomacy. Quintilian disrupts the negotiations; ...”<sup>626</sup> Indeed, Wace’s audience would have felt Gawain’s actions to be justified, as he maintains the authority of the Britons.<sup>627</sup> Compared to Geoffrey, Wace makes Gawain’s actions appear to be more justified, and Gawain becomes an ambassador of his people, rather than an easily angered young man.

Wace’s Arthur, then, owes much to Geoffrey’s portrayal of the king. Like his counterpart in the *Historia*, Arthur here displays courage and generosity. Nonetheless, there is a clear move towards courtly literature, with a high value placed on chivalry. As mentioned earlier, Wace’s *Brut* has been described as a bridge between the epic and the courtly hero, and his Arthur as more ambivalent. However, the examples discussed above do not point to an ambivalent king. They suggest a king who balances the characteristics required of a good king, which at first may appear to be contradictory, and show them to be founded in moderation. Arthur is brutal to the Scots, but their emotional pleas move him, and he leaves them alone. Gawain, acting as an extension of his uncle in Rome, is not only spirited, but also diplomatic. Indeed, he does not allow himself to be swayed by his fellow young knights to start a fight immediately, but acts only when he is directly offended. The fight with the giant is perhaps the most telling example. In deciding to fight the giant alone, but requesting support when necessary, Arthur is shown to be courageous and sensible at the same time. This, Wace tells us (and, importantly, his royal audience), is what good kingship entails: a marriage of strength and mercy, of seeking honour and glory and accepting help when necessary. Wace’s expansion of the plot involving Mordred’s betrayal enhances the dangers of domestic treachery already established by Geoffrey.

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<sup>626</sup> Shichtman, “Gawain in Wace”, 112.

<sup>627</sup> Shichtman, “Gawain in Wace”, 112–113.

### 3.4. Layamon's *Brut*

#### 3.4.1. Introduction

Layamon more than doubled the content of his *Brut*, compared to Wace,<sup>628</sup> and added significantly to Wace's passages on Arthur.<sup>629</sup> More than just a central figure in the history of the Britons, Layamon's Arthur becomes an epic national hero. Indeed, Derek Pearsall has stated that Layamon's *Brut* is the "only true English national epic."<sup>630</sup> However, the dating of this epic poses some difficulties. References to Queen Eleanor and King Henry II in the poem suggest a date between 1189 and 1204, although this could be extended to as late as 1236.<sup>631</sup> The text survives in two copies, Cotton Caligula A.ix and Cotton Otho C.xiii, though the latter is significantly reduced in content and is less archaic in its language.<sup>632</sup> Layamon's *Brut* may have fewer surviving manuscript copies, but it is significant for an understanding of the Arthurian legend's development and, specifically, for its interpretation of and approach to kingship. Layamon did more than merely expand the Arthurian tales he found in Wace. Where Wace's Arthur was a king on his way to becoming part of chivalric culture, Layamon retraces his predecessors' steps and recalls a reimagined pre-Conquest past. This is very much a different past from the one Geoffrey portrays in his *Historia*. Whereas Geoffrey used heroic elements to put flesh on the bones of his great king, Layamon's Arthur constitutes a conscious attempt at the continuation of pre-Conquest literary heroes and style. As Remensnyder has noted, imaginative memory can be the result of "a sense of general discontinuity, of alienation from a present characterized by rapid social change, and from a past become too distant."<sup>633</sup> All of these aspects are at play in the texts in this chapter, as the twelfth century was a time of great social and political change, as discussed above. Layamon, however, actively attempts to create continuity with the past by adopting and recreating its (imagined) style and heroes. The language used is also deliberately archaic: Layamon

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<sup>628</sup> *Layamon's Brut*, ed. and trans. W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg (Harlow: Longman Group, 1995), xvi.

<sup>629</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 16.

<sup>630</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 16.

<sup>631</sup> *Layamon's Brut*, ix.

<sup>632</sup> *Layamon's Brut*, ix.

<sup>633</sup> Remensnyder, *Remembering Kings Past*, 3–4.

employs alliterative, unrhymed, poetry reminiscent of Old English verse.<sup>634</sup> His choice to write in English is, therefore, significant.<sup>635</sup>

Contrary to what may be expected, however, Layamon does not demonstrate sympathy for the Saxons in his poem. In fact, as Carole Weinberg has noted, "... not only does Layamon express anti-Saxon sentiments in his poem; he deliberately deepens the anti-Saxon perspective he found in Wace."<sup>636</sup> To resolve this issue, several scholars have argued that Layamon is not so much interested in the people but in the land.<sup>637</sup> Eric Stanley agrees that the *Brut* is not about the kings but about Britain, but adds that the poem is especially concerned with the changing governance of Britain.<sup>638</sup> Furthermore, Stanley argues that, while Layamon discusses good and bad kingship, there is no theory of kingship in the poem.<sup>639</sup> The king is a public figure, and Layamon does not concern himself with personal characteristics. However, there are clear exceptions to these 'generalised portraits,' especially in the case of Arthur.<sup>640</sup>

I agree with Stanley's general assessment, with an important emendation. I will argue that Layamon is primarily concerned with England's (not Britain's) political history, but that a vision of kingship does emerge, most clearly in the *Arthuriad*. What sets Layamon's concept of good kingship apart, however, is the extent to which it is rooted in the country's general political history and the role played by the law. For Layamon, kingship is a part of politics, not the other way around. Layamon does not, in my view, merely copy Old English style and characteristics, but also —whether consciously or not— a vision of leadership that very closely resembles that found in

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<sup>634</sup> Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 16.

<sup>635</sup> Carole Weinberg has suggested Layamon may have been inspired in this by Coleman, Wulfstan of Worcester's biographer. Coleman used English for his biography of the Anglo-Saxon bishop, and as Layamon was the parish priest in a village close to Worcester he may well have read it. Carole Weinberg, "Victor and Victim: a view of the Anglo-Saxon past in Layamon's *Brut*," in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2000), 24.

<sup>636</sup> Carole Weinberg, "Victor and Victim", 25–26.

<sup>637</sup> For instance: Marie-Francoise Alamichel, "King Arthur's Dual Personality in Layamon's *Brut*", *Neophilologus* 77.2 (Jan. 1 1993): 303–319. See also Donald G. Bzdyl, "Introduction", in *Layamon's Brut: A History of the Britons*, trans. Donald G. Bzdyl (New York: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1989): 1–32.

<sup>638</sup> Stanley, "The Political Notion", 124.

<sup>639</sup> Stanley, "The Political Notion", 124.

<sup>640</sup> Marie-Francoise Alamichel, "King Arthur's Dual Personality", 303.

*Beowulf*.<sup>641</sup> Fate and changing circumstances, for instance, are important for Layamon. Good kingship is not static, but changes according to circumstances. Layamon acknowledges that perfect kings do not exist. In fact, Barron and Weinberg's assertion that "despite its linear narrative there persists an underlying theme of a noble society, born out of misfortune, striving at times for mere survival, at others for total dominance, only to fall again into disaster"<sup>642</sup> may well be equally applicable to *Beowulf*. Additionally, I agree with Christopher Cannon that there is no confusion about Layamon's sympathies: wars, political turmoil, changes of regime, all serve to highlight the stability of the law.<sup>643</sup> Thus, Layamon's interest in pre-Conquest England goes further than poetic style and heroic qualities. Layamon is interested in the rise and fall of dynasties, as is the *Beowulf* poet. Kings are important but their power is limited, and the wisdom of their decisions depends on the time and circumstances. Arthur, crucially, is a good king, but Layamon is the only one of the three discussed in this chapter who also offers overt criticism of the king. I will discuss three important features that illustrate Layamon's notion of kingship: the use of the land, the law, and peace. I will then comment on some further pre-Conquest elements, in order to demonstrate how Layamon's notion of kingship is rooted in the (imagined) past.

Layamon's interest in the history of England and his purpose for the *Brut* become clear in the proem.<sup>644</sup>

An preost wes on leoden,	Laȝamon wes ihoten,
he wes Leouenaðes sone	—liðe him beo Drihten!
He wonede at Ernleȝe,	at æðelen are chirechen
vppen Seuarne staþe	—sel þar him þuhte—
onfest Radestone;	þer he bock radde.
Hit com him on mode	and on his mern þonke

<sup>641</sup> It is noteworthy that Layamon even uses the word 'witene-imot' once (l. 5759), the only use in Middle English. As Stanley has noted, most of the instances of Witena Gemot in Old English are from the reign of Edward the Confessor, and none occur in Old English verse. "Some may think of that use as the last of early uses; I like to think of it as the first use by those who write the island story of Britain." Stanley, "The Political Notion", 134.

<sup>642</sup> Barron and Weinberg, *Laȝamon's Brut*, xix.

<sup>643</sup> Christopher Cannon, "Layamon and the Laws of Men", *English Literary History* 67.2. (Summer 2000): 357.

<sup>644</sup> Which only occurs in the Caligula manuscript.



þet he wolde of Engle      þa æðelæn tellen,  
 wat heo ihoten weoren      and wonene heo comen  
 þa Englene londe      ærest ahten  
 æfter þan flode      þe from Drihtene com (ll. 1–7).<sup>645</sup>

There was a priest in the land who was called Layamon,  
 He was Leovenath's son – God be gentle to him!  
 He lived at Areley, by a noble church  
 on the bank of the river Severn – he deemed it blissful there –  
 near Redstone; there he read books.  
 It came into his mind, a great thought,  
 that he would tell the noble deeds of the English,  
 what they were called and from where they came  
 who first possessed England  
 after the flood that came from God.<sup>646</sup>

In his opening lines, Layamon makes an interesting change compared to his source material in Wace, and indirectly Geoffrey. Elizabeth Bryan has stated that Layamon's motives are "debatable," but that they would have included "pastoral care."<sup>647</sup> I suggest, however, that Layamon makes his main aim very clear in the proem. Where Geoffrey states his intention to recount the history of the Britons, and Wace states that he will inform his readers about the rulers of England, Layamon aims to tell the story of the English. His wording here suggests that he interprets all inhabitants of England in the past as English (whether or not they themselves would have used a different name, e.g. Britons). Layamon appears to imagine every new group of people to inhabit England to eventually be absorbed into the land, and thus become part of its history. His story of the

<sup>645</sup> All middle English citations from the Brut are from Barron and Weinberg. Here, p. 2.

<sup>646</sup> Translations of the Middle English are my own.

<sup>647</sup> Elizabeth J. Bryan, "Layamon's Brut and the Vernacular Text", in *Reading Layamon's Brut: Approaches and Explorations*. Eds. Allen, Rosamund, Jane Roberts and Carole Weinberg (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 677.

English is thus a story of the people who lived in England, united in his narrative by their connection to the land.

### 3.4.2. The importance of land, law, and peace

Indeed, the land of England plays an important part in the *Brut*'s Arthuriad. It functions as a loyal retainer, in a close relationship with the king. This relationship is, as is the ideal, one of reciprocity; Arthur defends the land, and the land in return fights for him. For instance, in one of the Britons' battles against the Saxons, Layamon writes:

Saxes gunnen sinken       —sorȝe heom wes ȝiueðe!  
 Arður wende his spere ord   and forstod heom þene uord;  
 þer adruncke Sexes       fulle seoue þusend.  
 Summe heo gunnen wondrien   swa doð þe wilde cron  
 i þan moruene   þenne his flocc is awemmed  
 and him haldeð after   hauekes swifte,  
 hundes in þan reode       mid reouðe hine imeteð.  
 þenne nis him neouðer god,   no þat lond no þat flod:  
 hauekes hine smiteð,   hundes hine biteð.  
 þenne bið þe kinewurðe fozel   fæie on his siðe.  
 (ll. 10058–10067)

The Saxons started to sink —grief was their fate!  
 Arthur turned the point of his spear and blocked the ford;  
 A full seven thousand Saxons drowned there.  
 Some began to wander as the wild crane does  
 in the moorland when his flock is destroyed  
 and swift hawks pursue him,  
 hounds mercilessly attack him in the reeds.  
 Then neither the land or the water is good for him:  
 hawks strike him, dogs bite him.  
 Then the noble bird is doomed on his way.

Apart from the compelling natural imagery, it is clear that the land is against the Saxons. Throughout the poem they do not just fight the Britons, but also the English landscape.

Here, Layamon says, many drown, many are wandering around and, crucially, they are not safe in English waters or on English lands. In a later scene, Arthur drives the Saxons into the river Avon, and “þer sunken to the grunde/ fif and twenti hundred; þa al wes Auene stram / mid stele ibrugged!” (ll. 10615-10616: There five and twenty hundred sank to the bottom; then all the river Avon was bridged with steel!). There are many more examples, but the point is clear: Arthur uses the land to fight the Saxons, and the land consumes his enemies. Thus, I would suggest that, for Layamon, England belongs to those good kings who fight to defend it; their origins matter less.

Land plays an important role in other ways as well. Apart from Arthur’s desire to conquer as much territory as he can, Layamon differs significantly from Geoffrey and Wace when he describes the land the king gives away. As we have seen, Geoffrey writes that Arthur gave Normandy to his cupbearer Bedevere and Anjou to his seneschal Kay. Land was important for young men at court; in pre-Conquest England, it signalled an elevation of status, a sign that a warrior had proven himself worthy to the extent that mere treasure did not suffice anymore.<sup>648</sup> Layamon does not only mention Normandy and Anjou, but adds two other areas: Arthur bestows Boulogne and Le Mans on two other loyal retainers.<sup>649</sup> King Stephen, who died in 1154, had been count of Boulogne through marriage. Le Mans was the capital of Maine, inherited by Geoffrey of Anjou, and the birthplace of Henry II in 1133.<sup>650</sup> The two lands added by Layamon, then, function as an addition to the lands mentioned by Geoffrey, reflecting the importance of Boulogne and Le Mans for England’s rulers in the second half of the twelfth century.

These examples suggest that there is indeed a concept of ideal kingship in the poem, but it is one that does not appear or make sense when the poem is studied from an angle focussing on origins (i.e. those of Saxons, Normans, or Britons). Layamon expresses admiration and sympathy for kings regardless of their provenance. Admiration and sympathy, however, do not suggest a king is good or bad in the end. Layamon’s notion of kingship is too complex and entangled with politics for such an interpretation. That Arthur is a good king, despite his faults, becomes clear from his first description:

þa þe Arður wes king —hærne nu seollic þing—

<sup>648</sup> Dorothy Whitelock, *the Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 90–92.

<sup>649</sup> ll. 12065–12069.

<sup>650</sup> W.L. Warren, *Henry II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 11.

he wes mete-custi    ælc he quike monne,  
 cniht mid þan bezste,    wunder ane kene;  
 he wes þan ġungen for fader,    þan alden for frouer,  
 and wið þan vnwise    wunder ane sturnne;  
 woh him wes wunder lað    and þat rihte a leof.  
 ælc of his birlen    and of his bur-þæinen  
 and of his ber-cnihtes    gold beren an honden,  
 to ruggen and to bedde    iscrud mid gode webbe.  
 Nefde he neuere nænne coc    þat he nes keppe swiðe god,  
 neuær nanes cnihtes swein    þat he næs bald þein.  
 þe king heold al his hired    mid hæġere blise;  
 and mid swulche þinges    he ourercom alle kinges,  
 mid ræġere strengðe    and mid richedome;  
 swulche weoren his custes    þat al uolc hit wuste.  
 Nu wes Arður god king;    his hired hine lufede  
 æc hit wes cuð wide    of his kinedome. (ll. 9945–9961)

When Arthur was king —now listen to this remarkable thing—  
 He was generous to every living man,  
 among the finest of knights, extraordinarily bold;  
 he was a father to the young, a comfort to the old,  
 and with the foolish very severe;  
 injustice was very hateful to him and right beloved.  
 Each of his cupbearers and his chamberlains  
 and his footmen carried gold in their hands,  
 was clothed with fine cloth on the back and bed.  
 Never had he any cook who was not a good warrior,  
 never any knight's squire who was not a courageous thane.  
 The king kept all his household in great happiness;  
 and with such things he surpassed all kings,  
 with fierce strength and with splendour;  
 Such were his virtues that all people knew it.  
 Now Arthur was a good king; his followers loved him  
 and it was known far and wide beyond his kingdom.

Layamon's introduction to Arthur's character is a great expansion of Wace's depiction, as indeed Wace's portrait of the king was more detailed than Geoffrey's. Courage and generosity are still important; however, Layamon repurposes these two characteristics. Whereas Geoffrey was clear that Arthur fought the Saxons so he could redistribute their wealth, and Wace notes that the king was 'bold and invincible,' Arthur's courage in Layamon is not directly obvious. Indeed, what this passage suggests is that, for Layamon, good kingship entails managing social relations. Arthur surrounds himself with the right people: good warriors and courageous thanes who could also fulfil other purposes when at peace, such as serving as cook. His generosity, intriguingly, appears to be more a result of showing his personal wealth rather than rewarding those most loyal to him. Indeed, his generosity extends to 'every living man,' not just his closest warriors and advisers. Layamon, then, takes the same elements of kingship his predecessors had used, but reinterprets them in his portrait of Arthur. Additionally, Layamon reinvents the king's relationships with his people. Wace tells us that Arthur was 'proud to the haughty and gentle and compassionate to the humble,' but Layamon matches different behaviours (proud, gentle) with diverse roles. Arthur was 'a father to the young, and a comfort to the old,' showing that good kingship involves performing a variety of roles to a variety of people. Layamon also states that Arthur hated injustice, and his own interest in the law comes to the fore in the *Arthuriad*.

Arthur's love of justice in the *Brut* is reflected by the fact that Layamon portrays his kingdom as being firmly under the rule of law.<sup>651</sup> Indeed, Layamon's good kings distinguish themselves from the bad ones by establishing peace or law-giving.<sup>652</sup> I will discuss the themes of law and peace separately, though the two are intricately connected. It is in times of peace that a king can turn to the law in a bid to re-establish order in his kingdom. Conversely, a strong focus on justice and adherence to the law can aid a king in maintaining peace. It is when Arthur is at home in England, and not abroad fighting and expanding his kingdom, that we can understand Layamon's approach to them both, and the importance he attaches to them when it comes to kingship.

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<sup>651</sup> Pearsall, "*Arthurian Romance*", 18.

<sup>652</sup> Alice Sheppard, "Of This Is a King's Body Made: Lordship and Succession in Lawman's Arthur and Leir", *Arthuriana* 10.2 (Summer 2000): 51.

According to Alice Sheppard, however, Layamon does not show a particular interest in the law: “Lawman minimizes justice and law-giving. His discussion of ideal kingship centres firmly on the bond between lord and retainer: only strong lordship relations transform an aristocrat into a potential ruler and a would-be ruler into an ideal king.”<sup>653</sup> I agree with Sheppard that the relationship between lord and retainer is central to Layamon’s discussion of kingship, as indeed it was for Geoffrey and Wace. However, this interpretation assumes a narrow understanding of what law and justice meant in the eyes of Layamon. Sheppard suggests that it is the making of law that matters, the ‘law-giving,’ and that an author’s interest in the law is shown through a king who actively creates laws. This is not what Arthur does — in fact, I will return to the lack of written material in the text later in this chapter. Layamon is deeply interested in the law, but for him a good king is not so much a law-giver or law-maker but rather a law-maintainer. Whereas King Alfred presented himself as the creator of these laws, asserting his authority by being able to issue law, Arthur asserts his own authority by positioning himself as the protector of the law: a law that is a part of the land. Indeed, Laura Ashe has argued that the 1170s saw the emergence of the English common law, and that its main feature was that it was territorial, applying to all those living in the kingdom.<sup>654</sup> Law in the *Arthuriad*, then, is very much rooted in the past of the land, and is concerned with the confirmation of laws that had been made before war had broken out, in times of strong ancestors. Arthur’s task is to keep these laws and protect them. As Bruce O’Brien has noted, “law and justice were the tools of power,”<sup>655</sup> and Layamon’s interest in the law cannot be seen as separated from his focus on lord-retainer relationships: law is not made or affirmed privately, but publicly, as an act of power and unity. For instance, after he has defeated the Saxons and the Scots early on in his reign, Arthur goes to London and calls a council:

Arður for to Lundene and mid him his leoden.  
 He heold inne londe ane muchele hustinge  
 and sette alle þa laȝen þat stoden bi his ælderne daȝen,  
 alle þa laȝen gode þe her ær stoden.

<sup>653</sup> Sheppard, “Lordship and Succession”, 51.

<sup>654</sup> Ashe, *Fiction and History*, 13.

<sup>655</sup> Bruce O’Brien, “Authority and Community”, in *A Social History of England, 900–1200*, ed. Julia Crick and Elizabeth Van Houts (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 81.

He sette grið, he sette frið, and alle freodomes.  
(ll. 11085–11089).

Arthur went to London and with him his followers.  
He held a large assembly in the kingdom  
and confirmed all the laws that existed in the days of his  
ancestors, all the good laws that once existed in this country.  
He established the peace of the nation,<sup>656</sup> and all liberties.

Arthur here performs a public show of continuity. As Sheppard has stated, Layamon establishes kingship via actions —kingship is performative.<sup>657</sup> It is important, therefore, that his followers are present. They are an integral part of the judicial process, because the establishing of peace and order is just as much a reciprocal act between lord and people as is the handing out of treasure, or fighting together in a war. Implicitly, the public re-establishment of law and justice creates a contract; as the final line above suggests, by establishing the law a king also confirms the rights of his followers, and promises to protect these. However, law becomes a more private matter in the *Brut* when Arthur is mortally wounded in the fight against Modred, and appoints Constantin, son of Cador, as his successor:

Ich þe bitache here mine kineriche;  
and wite mine Bruttes a to þines lifes,  
and hald heom alle þa laȝen þa habbeoð istonden a mine daȝen,  
and alle þa laȝen gode þa bi Vðeres daȝen stode.  
(ll. 14273–14276)

I here commit to you my kingdom;  
and defend my Britons as long as you live,

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<sup>656</sup> Barron and Weinberg translate ‘grið’ and ‘frið’ as law and order, respectively. However, as the Middle English Compendium acknowledges, the meaning of the words was, by the twelfth century, very similar, and could both be translated as peace or peace of the nation. The possible translations once again affirm the connection between peace and the law. Middle English Compendium, online, accessed October 12, 2019 [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED19540/track?counter=1&search\\_id=1940812](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED19540/track?counter=1&search_id=1940812).

<sup>657</sup> Sheppard, “Lordship and Succession”, 50–51.

and keep for them all the laws that endured in my days,  
and all the good laws that stood in Uther's days.

Ideally, Arthur would have established peace, and have had an heir. Instead, he dies on a battlefield, and needs to make a quick decision about his succession. Considering all those closest to him have died already, including Gawain, the task falls to Constantin. It is noteworthy that, of all the topics Layamon could have discussed here, he chooses the law. For Arthur, it is perhaps the closest thing to an orderly succession, and to stability and continuity, he can achieve now.

The importance of law for stability and continuity suggests it not only matters for the future, but is also rooted in the past. It is important that the laws Arthur confirms are ancestral, as I have mentioned. Harking back to a predecessor's laws and confirming them allows a king to demonstrate continuity, and a sense of kinship with the rulers who have gone before him. This is also reflected in Layamon's use of the word 'istonden' in the passage above. From the Old English 'gestandan,' where it means 'to stand, remain, last,'<sup>658</sup> it came to mean 'to endure, last, be in force' in Middle English, amongst other things.<sup>659</sup> Whichever way one decides to translate the word, it always suggests a sense of continuity, a tangible link with the past. It is not surprising, then, that kings such as William the Conqueror were anxious to show themselves respectful of earlier laws, especially the laws of Edward the Confessor, whose reign was seen as a 'golden age,' and whose "crowning achievement was said to have been its laws."<sup>660</sup> Arthur, too, confirms the laws of his ancestors to reassert his authority and demonstrate continuity. Indeed, Layamon mentions the laws of earlier British kings. Arthur's predecessor Belin, for instance, is known for his law-giving: "And Belin i ðisse londe / madeke læzen stronge / and lazen swiðe gode / þe bi his liue stoden" (ll. 2990-2991; And Belin made strong laws in this land, and good laws which stood during his lifetime.) The fact that Arthur does not *make* any laws, or 'gives' them, does not minimise Layamon's interest in laws and justice. Indeed, as his name suggests, Layamon was a 'man of law' himself. As Cannon has

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<sup>658</sup> Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, online, accessed 15/11/2019, <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/016143>.

<sup>659</sup> Middle English Compendium, online, accessed 15/11/2019, [https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english/dictionary/dictionary/MED23519/track?counter=1&search\\_id=1940848](https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english/dictionary/dictionary/MED23519/track?counter=1&search_id=1940848).

<sup>660</sup> Bruce R. O'Brien, *God's Peace and King's Peace: The Laws of Edward the Confessor* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 17.



argued, “Lazamon is a ‘man of law’ not only because his name carried that meaning, but because his *Brut* embraces the law’s details in order to celebrate them and their capacity to resolve conflicting political affinities within a single position.”<sup>661</sup> In other words, it is the law that arises from and unites the land, regardless of where the king who rules it may have come from. A good king is a king who uses the ancient laws of the land to provide stability. However, as discussed, the law constitutes a public performance, and is thus connected to both the relationship between a king and his followers and a king and his predecessors. One example may serve to demonstrate this interaction between peace, law, and relationships between lord and followers.

The story of the round table may have been Wace’s invention, but is significantly developed by Layamon. After a deadly fight at court between a group of knights, proud and angry at who should be served first, a craftsman approaches Arthur with an ingenious idea. He offers to make the king a table which can seat at least sixteen hundred people:

and ne dert þu nauere adrede to þere worlde longen  
 þat auere ænie modi cniht at þine borde makie fiht,  
 for þer scal þe hehȝe beon æfne þan loȝe. (ll. 11439–11441).

And you never need to fear to the end of the world  
 that ever any haughty knight starts a fight at your table,  
 for there the high shall be on the same level as the low.

In Wace, the Round Table was also intended to curb the knights’ feelings of superiority, and to promote equality, as we have seen. However, Layamon adds the element of peace and order: there is no fight in Wace, no violence that necessitates a solution such as the Round Table. It is not, therefore, simply a matter of equality for Layamon, but a matter of justice and keeping of the peace.

Times of peace, then, allow a king to establish law and order in his kingdom. As Eric Stanley has noted, “An immediate aim of good kingship may be victory; but a wise king’s ultimate aim is peace for and within his realm.”<sup>662</sup> Conversely, in the *Brut* this aim is achieved through war and the king’s martial skills. As we have seen, being successful

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<sup>661</sup> Cannon, “Layamon and the Laws”, 338.

<sup>662</sup> Stanley, “The Political Notion”, 123.

in war allows a king to reward his followers' loyalty. Layamon emphasises Arthur's martial qualities, such as strength and courage, compared to Geoffrey and Wace.<sup>663</sup> When Arthur is about to defeat the giant, for instance, Layamon notes that

Æuere wes Arður æhðe bideled;  
 þet wes sutel þeron, sellic þah hit þunche,  
 for Arður mihte þere þene eotende al tohæuwe,  
 slan þene scucke þer he lai and slapte.  
 þa nolde Arður on slepen na wiht hine areppen  
 leste he an uferre daze upbræid iherde. (ll. 12989–12994)

Arthur was clearly without fear;  
 That was evident, strange as it may seem,  
 for Arthur could there have slain the giant,  
 strike the demon where he lay and slept.  
 But Arthur would never attack him in his sleep  
 lest he in later days should hear scorn.

Arthur's fearlessness in facing the giant, and his concern for his reputation, would have been at home in Old English heroic literature such as *Beowulf*.<sup>664</sup> Despite the importance of strength and courage, Layamon presents them as a means to an end. Such characteristics allow a king to establish peace and stability in his kingdom. Indeed, despite the fact that Arthur frequently instills fear in his people, "Like the other good kings in the *Brut*, Arthur is by nature a peaceful ruler."<sup>665</sup> This fear serves a clear purpose as it inspires his men to fight for their king's approval, perhaps even more than they fight against their enemies.<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>663</sup> Grzegorz Buczynski, "Battling against Men and Monsters: King Arthur as a Warrior in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, Wace's *Roman de Brut*, and Layamon's *Brut*", in *The Lives of Texts: Exploring the Metaphor*, ed. Katarzyna Pisarska and Andrzej Sławomir Kowalczyk (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 150.

<sup>664</sup> Buczynski has also noted similarities with the Battle of Maldon. Buczynski, "Battling against Men", 150.

<sup>665</sup> Bzdyl, *Layamon's Brut*, 19.

<sup>666</sup> Joseph Parry, "Arthur and Possibility: The Philosophy of Layamon's *Arthuriad*", *Arthuriana* 26.1 (Spring 2016): 67.

The importance of peace in Layamon's *Brut* becomes clearer when one of his additions is explored further. In the *Historia*, Cador, Duke of Cornwall, expresses contentment that the Britons can once more prove themselves on the battlefield. Wace adds a reply by Gawain (Walwein), who says that peace is good, also for love affairs.<sup>667</sup> Layamon adopts Gawain's reply, but modifies it. In his text, peace is not simply pleasant, it is given by God, and makes men better:

Cador, þu ært a riche mon! þine rædes ne beoð noht idon,  
 for god is grið and god is frið þe freoliche þer haldeð wið —  
 and Godd sulf hit makede þurh his Goddcunde—  
 for grið makeð godne mon gode workes wurchen  
 for alle monnen bið þa bet þat lond bið þa murgre.  
 (ll. 12454–12458)

Cador, you are a powerful man! Your advice is not good,  
 for peace is good and prosperity is good if one maintains them freely  
 —and God himself made it through his divine nature—  
 for peace makes a good man do good deeds  
 that is for all men better, the land is the happier.

Gawain's portrays peace as the ultimate goal, created by God, and as such improves men rather than makes them idle, as Cador had argued. It is noteworthy that Gawain adds the caveat 'if they are maintained freely.' A peace that is imposed is not beneficial for the realm. Through Layamon's addition and different approach to the situation here we gain insight into his conception of kingship. The fear and the martial skills displayed by Arthur, together with his courage and strength, are useful in a king only in so far as he uses them to establish peace. As Arthur mediates between his two loyal followers, he begins his speech by emphasising his relationship with them:

gold ich habbe and gærsume; gumemen ich æm ælder.  
 No biwan ich hit noht ane, ah dude we alle clæne.  
 (ll. 12469–12470)

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<sup>667</sup>

ll. 10765–10772.

I have gold and rewards; I am a leader of men.

I did not conquer on my own, but we did it all together.

The two lines appear to contradict each other. First Arthur asserts his dominance; then he says it was a common effort. However, these two lines encapsulate Layamon's vision of kingship quite well. Arthur is here shown maintaining the peace, not in the kingdom, but at his own court. He reaffirms how success has been achieved through cooperation, with himself as leader. In effect, what Arthur demonstrates here is the essence of good kingship: maintaining peace through fighting, together, and rewarding one's loyal followers with treasure.

### 3.4.3. Pre-Conquest Elements: orality, the hall, and the uncle-nephew relationship

Finally, three points need to be made about Layamon's use of the pre-Conquest past as a tool for conveying Arthur's power. As discussed previously, Layamon uses archaic language for his poem. Three further thematic elements stand out here: the use of orality, the importance of the hall, and the relationship between uncle and nephew. These elements show that Layamon uses the past not to show its differences, but to provide a sense of continuity.

Orality is significant in the poem, demonstrated through its use of language and the storyline. Layamon uses Old English oral style in his language and makes what is *heard* rather than what is *read* a paramount feature of communication and Arthur's reputation in his story. As Veldhoen has argued, "Layamon's manipulations of his material and his style in selected details belong to the repertoire of the oral tradition rather than the learned literary style."<sup>668</sup> For instance, the poem's clear three-part structure (much more obvious than in Geoffrey or Wace),<sup>669</sup> ending with the death of the hero conferring his power to a non-directly related successor, is reminiscent of the structure of *Beowulf*. Orality in the story, however, is equally important. I have already discussed Cador and Gawain's replies to the Roman messengers demanding tribute, but it is telling that, unlike their counterparts in Geoffrey and Wace, the messengers deliver their

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<sup>668</sup> N. H. G. E. Veldhoen, "Towards National Identity: Literary Manipulation in the Arthurian Section of Layamon's Brut", *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur Älteren Germanistik* 48 (Jan 1 1997): 19.

<sup>669</sup> Veldhoen, "Towards National Identity", 20.

message orally. Additionally, Arthur sends them away with an oral reply. While accompanied by written messages, it is the oral message that we see (or hear?) being delivered. As Parry has noted, “Power emanates from Arthur not by his sword, but by the speech-acts he performs.”<sup>670</sup> Of course, Arthur fights his battles, but it is ultimately through orality that he achieves his aims: many kingdoms submit to him because they have *heard* of his reputation, and his men *listen* to his battle-speeches, which motivate them to fight harder and more bravely. As a reimagining of pre-Conquest oral culture, then, Arthur’s world and his power depend on the words he chooses and to whom he speaks them.

The second element that Layamon uses to evoke the past relates to the hall. Arthur, shortly before finally returning to Britain, has a telling dream.

Me imette þat mon me hof uppen are halle;  
 þa halle ich gon bistriden swulc ich wolde riden;  
 alle þa lond þa ich ah alle ich þer ouer sah,  
 and Walwein sat biouren me; me sweord he bar an honde.  
 þa com Moddred faren þere mid unimete uolke;  
 he bar an his honde ane wiax stronge.  
 He bigon to hewene hardliche swiðe  
 and þa postes forheou alle þa heolden up þa halle.  
 þer ich iseh Wenheuer eke, wimmonnen leofuest me;  
 al þere mucche halle rof mid hire honden heo todroh.  
 (ll. 13984–13993)

I dreamt that someone had seated me high up on a hall;  
 Bestriding the hall as if I were riding it;  
 I oversaw all the land that I own,  
 And Gawain sat before me; he carried my sword in his hand.  
 Then Mordred travelled there with an enormous army;  
 He carried in his hand a strong axe.  
 He began to cut very fiercely  
 and hew all the posts that held up the hall.

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<sup>670</sup> Parry, “Arthur and Possibility”, 71.

There I also saw Guinevere, the dearest of women to me,  
she pulled down the whole roof with her hands.

As I discussed in chapter one, the hall was both a centre and symbol of power in Old English literature, and Layamon employs its significance in a similar manner. Arthur's dream tells him of Mordred's and Guinevere's treachery in very specific terms. I suggest it is important that Layamon states Arthur was placed on the hall by someone, that he was put in a position of power by others, rather than referring to his own conquests. Real power, he suggests, is given (by God, by birthright), and then expanded. It is not taken by force, as attempted by Mordred. The destruction of the hall in this dream also has further implications. As Old English poems such as *Beowulf* make clear, the hall is a symbol of stability for the whole kingdom, not just for the king. Thus, when the hall falls, the kingdom itself loses stability and protection, and will suffer. It is not simply Arthur's power which is at stake here. By including Arthur's dream of the hall, Layamon emphasises the importance of stability for good kingship, whilst at the same time giving more space to the idea already present in Geoffrey and Wace that Mordred's treachery, treachery by someone as close as a nephew, can harm the very foundations of the kingdom.

Mordred's treachery is, therefore, all the more severe because he is Arthur's nephew. Both Geoffrey and Wace highlight this point. Mordred is not the only important nephew in the *Arthuriad*, however. Bedevere's death at the hands of the Romans on the battlefield is avenged by his nephew, Ridwathelen, who is only given a name by Layamon. However, Layamon, unlike his predecessors, specifies that Bedevere's nephew is his sister's son. This relationship was also crucial in *Beowulf*, where Beowulf himself was close to, and succeeded, his maternal uncle Hygelac.<sup>671</sup> The poem also gives us an example of a treacherous nephew, Hrothgar's nephew Hrothulf, who was said to have killed Hrothgar's son and heir after the old king's death. However, there is an important difference here with the *Brut*. Hrothulf was Hrothgar's paternal nephew, son of his brother, unlike Mordred, who was the son of Arthur's sister. I suggest this difference is a deliberate choice on Layamon's part. Paternal nephews like Hrothulf were often

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<sup>671</sup> Rolf Bremmer, "The Importance of Kinship: Uncle and Nephew in *Beowulf*", *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 15 (1980): 22–38. Bremmer discusses uncles and nephews in *Beowulf* and in other pre-Conquest texts.

considered legitimate heirs to the throne, as King Alfred's struggle with his brother's sons demonstrates. As a sister's son, however, Mordred's position was not only less strong in this respect, but also goes against the traditional importance of strong ties between nephew and maternal uncle. In this way, then, Layamon both diminishes Mordred's claim to the throne, but also highlights his treachery.

These pre-Conquest elements in the *Brut* show how Layamon envisaged the past and used it in his poem. Arthur's power rests not so much on his martial skills, but on his words; the hall is a symbol and centre of power; and the relationship between king and (maternal) nephew is important, and the consequences are severe if it breaks down. Rather than creating a distance between his own time and the past, I suggest these examples demonstrate further how Layamon aims to establish a sense of continuity and stability. The central focus of this aim, the law, can in itself be seen as a pre-Conquest element. The Normans did not bring laws with them, and William the Conqueror was eager to show himself "subject to his predecessors' legal provisions."<sup>672</sup> It is this sentiment that Layamon wishes to convey by creating a pre-Conquest atmosphere in his text: all these elements, perhaps especially the symbolic meaning of the hall and the relationships with nephews, underline the importance of stability.

#### 3.4.4. Arthur as perfect king?

In Geoffrey and Wace, Arthur is depicted as an all but perfect king. Layamon has often been said to follow their example. Judith Weiss has suggested that, as the twelfth century produced a "steadily more critical picture of Arthur," Layamon perhaps did not wish to adopt this depiction.<sup>673</sup> Additionally, Donald Bzdyl has stated that "of all the topics Layamon deals with, none interests him more than the role of the king in leading his people, " and that Arthur is the "exemplary ideal king."<sup>674</sup> However, I suggest that Layamon's Arthur is not a perfect king at all, but a good king of the kind found in *Beowulf*: a king who does his best but is above all a human, and can make mistakes.

Arthur's mistake, interestingly, shows a lack of self-awareness, but also ultimately stems from not taking the relationship with his retainers seriously enough. In this scene, the Saxons meet with him and ask the king for mercy, saying they will pay tribute to him

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<sup>672</sup> Cannon, "Layamon and the Laws", 343.

<sup>673</sup> Weiss, "Wace to Layamon via Waldef", 560.

<sup>674</sup> Bzdyl, *Layamon's Brut*, 16.

and then return back to Germany. Arthur laughs, boasting of the power he now has over the Saxon leaders, but then tells them he will show mercy. He takes hostages, and then allows the Saxons to depart, stating that the Saxons will “tellen tidende / of Arðure kinge, hu ich heom habbe ifreoied / for mines fader saule, / and for mine freodome / ifrouered þa wræcchen” (ll. 10425–10427; they will tell news of King Arthur, how I have freed them for my father’s soul, and in my liberality spared the unhappy creatures). Layamon then adds that “Her wes Arður þe king aðelen bidæled” (l. 10428; Here king Arthur had lost his wits). Arthur boasts that it is his generosity here that prevents him from killing the Saxon leaders. It is, rather, his pride that leads him to make this decision, as he wishes that tales be told about him by those returning home. More crucial, however, is the fact that here, unlike elsewhere, Arthur does not consult his advisers. Indeed, Layamon notes that nobody dared to speak up against the king.<sup>675</sup> More than simply showing pride and a thirst for glory, Arthur, like Locrin, ignores the importance of a good relationship with his most noble retainers when he is blinded by his own desire. Arthur is still a good king — but also, crucially, an imperfect one.

Arthur is not the only good (and ultimately human) king in the *Brut*. Brutus’ eldest son, Locrin, has many attributes of a good leader: “þe ældeste broðer / Locrin was ihaten / þe wes þe wiseste, / þe wes þe warreste, / þe wes þe strengeste; stif he wes on þonke” (ll. 1054–1056; The eldest brother, who was called Locrin, was the wisest, the most vigilant, the strongest; he was unwavering in mind). These qualities serve him well, until he falls in love with Æstrild, a foreign woman, and breaks his promise to Corineus, the ruler of Cornwall, to marry his daughter, Guendoleine. After Corineus threatens war, Locrin marries Guendoleine but secretly keeps Æstrild as his mistress. After Corineus’ death, he banishes his wife and marries Æstrild. Guendoleine takes revenge, however: she raises an army, kills Locrin and his new wife (and their daughter), and reigns well for fifteen years until she abdicates in favour of her son. Eric Stanley has summarised the notions of kingship in Layamon’s time as ideally combining power with wisdom and “justice tempered by mercy.”<sup>676</sup> At first glance, Locrin appears to possess all the necessary qualities for a king, but he makes mistakes which nearly lead to alienating close allies and to a civil war. In the case of Locrin, confronted with desire he abandons the

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<sup>675</sup> ll. 10429–10430.

<sup>676</sup> Stanley, “The Political Notion”, 123.



wisdom he was known for, ignoring his primary task of doing what is best for the kingdom, rather than for himself.

### 3.5. Conclusion

To conclude, Arthur undergoes a transformation as a symbol of kingship in the works of Geoffrey, Wace, and Layamon. This transformation gives an insight into the conceptions of kingship these three authors wished to convey, depending on their historical context, aims, and audience. Geoffrey wrote his *Historia* at a crucial point in Britain's history, namely the end of Norman rule and the beginning of the Civil War which would, eventually, herald the beginning of Angevin rule under Henry II. In this unstable political climate, Geoffrey saw an opportunity, based on fleeting mentions of an old British war-leader called Arthur, to recreate a narrative detailing the rise and fall of the Britons. As I have argued, however, the depiction of Arthur seems to deliberately appeal to an idea of pre-Conquest heroic rulership. As such, the interpersonal relationship between Arthur and his retainers is crucial: the well-being of the kingdom depends on their cooperation and loyalty. Through his depiction of Arthurian kingship, Geoffrey aimed not only to boost the reputation of the Welsh as descendants of the British, but more importantly to demonstrate the importance of unity. His "History of the Kings of Britain" is exactly that, a history detailing the kings who ruled over Britain, regardless of where their origins may have lain. Geoffrey's Arthur is, then, not just a symbol of internal cooperation, based on good relationships with his own men. He also demonstrates an awareness of the wider world: given good relationships, skills in battle and, notably, the absence of treachery, a new king of England can be just as successful as Arthur had been in the past.

Wace's *Roman de Brut*, which he claims is a translation of Geoffrey's *Historia*, was in fact adapted to a new audience, and came with different aims. While presented to a royal couple, it could also reach a wider audience due to his writing in French rather than Latin. Additionally, this audience would overwhelmingly have been a lay one. Wace's Arthur became a more courtly king, reflecting the rise of courtly literature during this time. His Arthur, however, is not ambiguously placed between a pre-Conquest ideal and a courtly ideal. Rather, I have suggested that Wace's conception of good kingship, as demonstrated by Arthur, is founded on the idea that a good king does indeed have all the usual characteristics, such as being generous. Crucially, however, Wace shows us the

importance of moderation in these virtues. Thus, his Arthur is a great and brave warrior, but also shows he is sensible and does not seek out danger unnecessarily. His addition of the Round Table underscores this idea, as it demonstrates the importance of cooperation and unity at a time when the king's retainers would rather demonstrate their bravery and worth over their fellow retainers.

Geoffrey and Wace, then, provide quite particular visions of good kingship. Contrary to the suggestions of some scholars, I have here argued that Layamon does this too. His conception of kingship is fundamentally rooted in the land and the law. While a king may never be perfect, his provision of stability and continuity in their realms can make him a good ruler. I have discussed several elements that are important for Layamon in this respect: the depiction of the land, the importance of the law, and the ultimate aim for peace. These are all brought to life by his use of pre-Conquest elements demonstrating the king's power, the importance of good interpersonal relationships to maintain the kingdom's stability, and continuity of its land and laws. It is in his desire for this continuity that Layamon differs from Geoffrey and Wace. Where Geoffrey seems to have responded directly to an unfolding political crisis, and saw an opportunity for a rehabilitation of the Welsh, and Wace provided a text with an Arthur who could serve as an example to Henry II, Layamon's depiction of Arthur serves a different purpose. For Layamon, the past is not just a mirror to the present, but a demonstration of how a focus on land and law can provide a kingdom with a sense of stability even at a time of political uncertainty and conquest. What matters, in the end, is not who rules: "Layamon's point is finally, then, William's point in *Domesday Book*: the land is indomitable, it cannot *be* conquered, for its very permanence ensures that it will win through even the most drastic change in the agents who hold it."<sup>677</sup> Layamon emphasises that kingship is temporary, and more like a guardianship. A good king guards the land and its ancient laws, ensuring peace and stability. His interest in the pre-Conquest past and the Britons serves this purpose. It is, I propose, a purpose which signals a crucial change in thinking about kingship in literary texts: while war and fighting remain important factors, it is the land and the law which good kings ultimately protect. This becomes clearer in *Havelok the Dane*, which is the focus of the next chapter.

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<sup>677</sup> Cannon, "Layamon and the Laws", 351–352.

## Chapter 4: *Havelok the Dane*

### 4.1. Introduction

The thirteenth-century Middle English poem *Havelok the Dane* provides a suitable source for the study of royal authority not only because it features many rulers, but also because questions about legitimate kingship drive its action.<sup>678</sup> The six extant earlier versions of the story, such as Gaimar's *Estoire des Engleis* and the *Lai d'Haveloc*, raise questions as to which elements are original in the Middle English version, as well as about the aims the poet may have had.<sup>679</sup> As a result, scholarly interpretations of its message and views on kingship vary greatly. I will argue that these interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Rather, I suggest that these different messages are all part of the fabric of the story, each woven into its framework at different stages of its existence. In other words, I will argue that they show how the story was reused and remodelled according to each author's needs. The Middle English version that this chapter will consider, then, shows remnants not simply of earlier versions, but also of the messages these earlier versions carried. For example, while I will discuss how *Havelok* proposes a national approach to royal authority specifically centred on Edward I, earlier versions show a more local concern with authority. I suggest that the poet not only developed the story, but also used reimagined pasts to comment on the reign of Edward I.

*Havelok the Dane*, as a text about fictional kingship and reflecting the reigns of actual kings, provides important insights into ideas about royal authority in the late thirteenth century.<sup>680</sup> However, as the poet also reimagines past reigns and kingship —

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<sup>678</sup> The poem occurs in MS Laud Misc. 108 in the Bodleian Library. There are also some fragments in other manuscripts. For an overview of the manuscripts see G.V. Smithers, *Havelok*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), xi–xvi.

<sup>679</sup> I will refer to the Middle English version of the story as *Havelok* or *Havelok the Dane*.

<sup>680</sup> There is some variation when it comes to the dating of the poem. Smithers considers that there is evidence for a *terminus ante quam* of 1310 (lxxii). Diane Speed has stated that “the earliest possible date is some years after ca 1200.” Diane Speed, *Medieval English Romances: Part one* (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1993), 26. Taking into account its possible allusions to Edward I, Speed speculates that it could have been composed between 1290–1295 (28). Kenneth Eckert dates the poem to “approximately 1285.” Kenneth Eckert, *Middle English Romances in Translation: Amis and Amiloun, Athelston, Floris and Blancheflor, Havelok the Dane, King Horn, Sir Degare* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015), 139. As I argue for an

there are, for instance, references to pre-Conquest kingship and the civil war in the early twelfth century—I will discuss the poem in a wider historical context. While I will refer to other texts, such as *King Horn*, *Havelok* alone will be central to this chapter. The reason is that the poem in itself provides rich material for a study of kingship. A discussion of more texts would not elucidate my arguments further.

In order to understand the development of the poem, it is important to consider earlier versions of the story, with a specific focus on their relationship with the Middle English version. I will then briefly consider various scholarly interpretations of the poem's message so far. Both of these discussions will feed into the analysis of royal authority in the poem, and support my two main arguments. Firstly, differing interpretations about the poem's references are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Secondly, the poem relies on a perception of a shared past in order to bolster and defend Edward I's royal power at a time when his nobles were challenging his authority.

#### 4.1.1. Earlier versions

A brief overview of some of *Havelok*'s predecessors offers insight into the *Havelok* poet's reworking of the source material available to him. As Smithers has noted, there are six earlier versions relating the adventures of Havelok.<sup>681</sup> It is interesting that many of these versions are in the form of a chronicle rather than a romance, which “may imply that medieval readers felt that his story was more history than fiction, but what exactly the history of *Havelok* was was by no means clear.”<sup>682</sup> Two versions are of importance for a discussion of the Middle English *Havelok*.<sup>683</sup> The first of these is the earliest extant version, which can be found in Geoffrey Gaimar's *L'Estoire des Engleis*, which comprises 816 lines and dates to the mid-twelfth century.<sup>684</sup> While the *Estoire* opens with

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interpretation of the poem in the context of Edward I's reign, I consider the poem to be composed in the late thirteenth century. A more precise dating is, for the purpose of this chapter, not required.

<sup>681</sup> Smithers, *Havelok*, xvi–xxxii.

<sup>682</sup> Richard J. Moll, “‘Nest pas autentik, mais apocrophum’: Haveloks and Their Reception in Medieval England”, *Studies in Philology* 105.2 (2008): 183.

<sup>683</sup> The other four are mostly short summaries, or concur mostly with Gaimar's version or the Breton lai. See, for instance, Smithers for an outline of these versions.

<sup>684</sup> Revisiting recent scholarship, Paul Dalton has suggested a composition between 1141 and 1150. Paul Dalton, “The Date of Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire Des Engleis*, the Connections of his Patrons, and the Politics of Stephen's Reign”, *The Chaucer Review* 42.1 (2007): 33–34.

Havelok's story, it was a later addition, as Judith Weiss has noted.<sup>685</sup> Writing in French, Gaimar sets his version in the historical context of Arthurian Britain and the geographical context of Norfolk and Lindsey, Lincolnshire. Gaimar may have come across oral stories about Havelok in this part of the country when he was employed by the FitzGilbert family, who had important connections there.<sup>686</sup>

Gaimar's story can be summarised as follows: King Adelbrit of Norfolk marries Owain, sister of King Edelsi of Lindsey. They have a daughter, Argentille. After the death of her parents, Argentille becomes the ward of Edelsi, who wants her kingdom for himself. He marries her to a cook, Cuheran. Argentille has a dream in which animals submit to Cuheran, and then sees flames coming out of her husband's mouth at night. Cuheran cannot explain the flames and tells her he has always emitted them while asleep. She then suggests they visit his family in Grimsby. There, Havelok is informed of his real name, and told he is the son and heir of King Gunter of Denmark, who was killed by King Arthur. The new Danish king, Odulf, is not popular. Argentille and Havelok travel to Denmark to claim Havelok's rightful throne, and then return to fight Edelsi. Argentille, wanting to trick Edelsi into thinking they have the larger army, instructs her husband to put the heads of his dead soldiers on stakes. Edelsi surrenders and conveniently dies fifteen days later, allowing Havelok and Argentille to take their thrones and rule their countries together.<sup>687</sup>

According to Weiss, Gaimar's version was intended as pro-Danish propaganda. Indeed, she considers it to be a text supportive of Cnut's claim to the English throne.<sup>688</sup> Whether or not this was the case, it is important here to note two things: that the story takes place in a local English context, rather than national, and that it has an Arthurian setting.

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<sup>685</sup> Judith Weiss, *The Birth of Romance in England. The Romance of Horn, The Folie Tristan, The Lai of Haveloc, and Amis and Amilun. Four Twelfth-Century Romances in the French of England* (Tempe, Arizona: ACMRS, 2009), 21.

<sup>686</sup> See Dalton, "Geoffrey Gaimar's *Estoire*", 33–36, for Gaimar's connections with the Fitz Gilbert family. See Nancy Mason Bradbury, "The Traditional Origins of *Havelok the Dane*", *Studies in Philology* 90.2 (Spring, 1993): 123–124, for the Lincolnshire origins of the story.

<sup>687</sup> Summary based on Geoffrey Gaimar, *History of the English vol II: Translation*, trans. Thomas Duffus Hardy & Charles Trice Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>688</sup> Weiss, *The Birth of Romance*, 21.

The *Lai d'Haveloc*, written between 1190 and 1210,<sup>689</sup> is mostly based on Gaimar's version, but was intended to be a separate story, not part of a chronicle.<sup>690</sup> Weiss has argued that the poet must have travelled from the Continent to Lincolnshire, where he came across Gaimar's text, and where he may also have heard oral versions.<sup>691</sup> This Anglo-Norman poem is important mainly because, as Susan Crane has stated, the Middle English *Havelok* is likely based on this version.<sup>692</sup> In addition, some themes that the poet of the *Lai* touches upon are reworked and expanded in *Havelok*, such as the rule of law and the importance of a king's community.<sup>693</sup>

These earlier versions demonstrate two important differences compared to the Middle English *Havelok*. Firstly, while Lincolnshire is still important in *Havelok*, the political concerns involved become those of the English kingdom. Secondly, the story is removed from its setting in Arthurian Britain to an Anglo-Saxon context, which (for instance) includes the use of Old English names. The implications brought on by these changes are revealed through the actions of the poem's major characters. Specifically, the role of its female protagonist, the English princess Goldeboru,<sup>694</sup> is reinterpreted in such a way that she becomes a personification of her country, as I will discuss. Before I turn to the actual poem, however, there are some important points to make about its historical context, and the lack of consensus amongst scholars on this topic.

#### 4.1.2. Interpretations of the Middle English poem

Several scholars have argued for an interpretation of *Havelok* as addressing contemporary (that is, late thirteenth-century) concerns with kingship. Christopher Stuart, for instance, has argued that *Havelok* represents the king, Edward I, and that the poem is meant to portray the king in a positive light at a time when his subjects were close to rebellion.<sup>695</sup>

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<sup>689</sup> Moll, "Haveloks and Their Reception", 166–169.

<sup>690</sup> Weiss, *The Birth of Romance*, 22.

<sup>691</sup> Weiss, *The Birth of Romance*, 24.

<sup>692</sup> Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: politics, faith and culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1986), 40. Crane acknowledges that this link is "likely, but not fully demonstrable." Cf with Bradbury, who argues instead that "we ought to recognize local legend as the primary inspiration for the Middle English poem, and perhaps to allow for 'contamination' from a French literary version" (117).

<sup>693</sup> Crane, *Insular Romance*, 45–51.

<sup>694</sup> See Smithers, *Havelok*, lxx, for the complex background of the princess' name.

<sup>695</sup> Christopher Stuart, "Havelok the Dane and Edward I in the 1290s", *Studies in Philology* 93.4. (Autumn 1996).

The poet's aim, according to Stuart, is to emphasise Edward's authority as ruler and his subjects' duties to him. Daniel Murtaugh has taken this one step further, arguing that *Havelok* contains a defense of the royal prerogative of purveyance, which meant the king could demand food and other supplies whenever he wanted. This controversial practice required all subjects to pay the same, as Edward increased purveyances to fund his military campaigns at the time *Havelok* was written.<sup>696</sup> This is reflected, according to Murtaugh, in *Havelok*'s endless hunger, and his need to be fed continuously.<sup>697</sup> Dominique Battles, on the other hand, has argued that the poet does not comment on his contemporary political situation, but rather looks back to the Conquest, and rebellion against Norman rule.<sup>698</sup> She links the poem to stories surrounding Hereward the Wake, and to its local roots, by discussing the importance of Peterborough Abbey for the poem's interpretation. Both of these readings are convincing. Indeed, I do not see why they need be mutually exclusive. In the following discussion, therefore, I will argue that the poet's alterations to the earlier (known) versions demonstrate how he sought to align the story more to his own, late thirteenth-century, concerns. In doing so he also used past kingship to comment on the reign of Edward I. Battles' arguments, linking the story with rebellion against Norman rule, find a place here too. I consider it possible, if not likely, that the poet, being well-educated and perhaps inspired by stories he grew up with or had come across, used features of stories familiar to him in order to furnish and decorate his own. More importantly, perhaps, it is possible that the story's references to the Conquest may be remnants of earlier (unknown) incarnations of the narrative, which the Middle English poet did not see fit to remove. Regarding Battles' arguments, the poet's transposition of the story from Arthurian Britain to early medieval England<sup>699</sup> could also be seen as a defence of the reign of King Cnut and the joys of good Anglo-Danish relations. However, I propose that, as Edward I was an admirer of King Arthur,<sup>700</sup> it would have been awkward

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<sup>696</sup> Daniel M. Murtaugh, "*Havelok the Dane*: Kingship, Hunger, and Purveyance," *Neophilologus* 100 (2016): 478.

<sup>697</sup> Murtaugh, "*Havelok the Dane*", 478–479.

<sup>698</sup> Dominique Battles, "Reconquering England for the English in *Havelok the Dane*," *The Chaucer Review* 47.2 (2012): 187–205.

<sup>699</sup> While the poet does not clarify when the story is supposed to have taken place, the name Athelwold could well point to a tenth-century setting, as will be discussed.

<sup>700</sup> As Helen Fulton has noted, "Edward I was the first of a series of medieval English kings to use the figure of Arthur as a symbolic ancestor whose reign over a single kingdom of Britain could be used to justify royal claims to a nation of England which stood for the whole of Britain." Helen Fulton, "Regions and Communities", in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval*

to have Arthur involved with the murder of the hero's father, as in Gaimar's version. An Anglo-Saxon setting, then, would serve better as it avoids linking King Arthur to royal murder. Indeed, Christopher Berard has noted that Edward I modelled his kingship on Arthurian ideas, and efforts were made to present him as Arthur's legitimate descendent.<sup>701</sup> The attribution of anti-Norman sentiment to the poem, as proposed by Battles, is complicated by the fact that, by the late thirteenth century, the Normans had been in charge for over 220 years, and had married into the English royal family. Thus, while Battles' arguments for the poem's connections to Hereward and Peterborough Abbey are convincing, I would suggest that they are the result of an interest in the past and local (oral) traditions, rather than a sign of direct opposition at the time of composition in the late thirteenth century.

Another reading of the poem has been put forth by Thorlac Turville-Petre, who has discussed the local (Lincolnshire) setting of the poem and its strong Danish heritage.<sup>702</sup> He has argued that "the poet of Havelok addresses the Anglo-Danish descendents of this population" saying that "it is a rewrite, indeed, of the story of Edric's treachery towards his king Edmund Ironside and the wrongful accession of the Danish Cnut, as we have heard it told by Robert of Gloucester."<sup>703</sup> Turville-Petre interprets the story as promoting the integration and unity of Danes and English, referring to Cnut's reign (with Havelok being Cnut). The result, in his view, is a representation of one united kingdom.<sup>704</sup> Similarly, Eleanor Parker has argued that the poem presents "an attempt to explain how and why the Danes came to settle in England, and how a Danish leader could come to rule England and Denmark together."<sup>705</sup> While these interpretations of the poem are also convincing, I do not think they stand up to scrutiny in the case of the Middle English version, because they disregard the poem's strong connection to contemporary concerns with the reign of Edward I. As I will argue below, the Middle English version offers direct commentary on Edward I and his reign. Instead, I suggest that Turville-

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*Literature in English*, ed. E.M. Treharne and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 516.

<sup>701</sup> Berard, *Arthurianism in Early Plantagenet England*, 235.

<sup>702</sup> Thorlac Turville-Petre, "Havelok and the History of the Nation", in *Readings in Medieval Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994).

<sup>703</sup> Turville-Petre, "Havelok and the History", 132.

<sup>704</sup> Turville-Petre, "Havelok and the History", 132–134.

<sup>705</sup> Eleanor Parker, "Havelok and the Danes in England: History, Legend, and Romance", *The Review of English Studies* 67.280 (2016): 433.



Petre's and Parker's readings of the poem actually belong to the story's origins, to earlier versions emanating from Lincolnshire. The Middle English poet retained these elements, and at the same time reshaped them to reflect circumstances at the court of Edward I. Thus, I do agree that the poem presents contemporary ideas about the reign of Cnut (and I consider this to be a more convincing interpretation than one that highlights anti-Norman sentiment), but I do not agree that this was the Middle English poet's intention. As Parker states, "*Havelok* is an imaginative engagement with the Anglo-Danish past,"<sup>706</sup> but in the Middle English version this engagement is redirected to reflect on late thirteenth-century royal authority.

Rather, I agree with Murtaugh's observations regarding the origins of the poem's Anglo-Danish remnants. Murtaugh points to the version of *Havelok* occurring in the early fourteenth-century *Castelford's Chronicle*, which links the story more closely to the Danish invasions in the ninth century. Murtaugh suggests that it may be part of "oral traditions preceding Gaimar that surface fitfully" in the *Chronicle*. The shift to a pre-Conquest setting, Murtaugh states, may be to "legitimize the claim of Cnut, a Dane, to be King of England."<sup>707</sup> This shift, then, would precede the Middle English *Havelok*, and not be our poet's invention. This interpretation is convincing as it explains the concern with Anglo-Danish relations in the poem as fragments of earlier (oral) versions, and supports my interpretation that the poet used a story borne out of local folklore and remodelled it as a reflection of Edward I and his royal power. Indeed, Murtaugh argues for a link between the poem and a defence of Edward I's royal prerogatives.

Whatever the exact circumstances, what we can say with some certainty is that *Havelok the Dane* is a hybrid text, showing great versatility, which can be seen in its indebtedness and references to many textual traditions and historical events, added to and amended by authors as time progressed. This versatility is best demonstrated by an analysis of the major characters and their relationship with royal authority, whether past or contemporary. These characters are King Athelwold, Goldeboru, and of course Havelok himself.

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<sup>706</sup> Parker, "*Havelok* and the Danes", 446.

<sup>707</sup> Murtaugh, "*Havelok the Dane*", 479.

## 4.2. Athelwold: reimagining pre-Conquest England

Athelwold,<sup>708</sup> king of England and father to an only daughter, named Goldeboru, dies early on in the poem, initiating the events that leave his daughter's inheritance to be usurped by the evil earl Godrich of Cornwall. Athelwold's saintly portrayal establishes a connection between Edward the Confessor and Edward I, who was named after the English king.<sup>709</sup> As his name suggests, Athelwold's royal authority recalls pre-Conquest kingship, and his link to Edward the Confessor shows a concern with legitimate kingship and the king's most important task, the protection of his kingdom.

The poem's manuscript context yields further insight into its promotion of an ideal of Englishness and its hagiographic qualities. While *Havelok* has often been considered a romance,<sup>710</sup> the manuscript shows how the poem was received as containing hagiographic elements. The *incipit* highlights this: "incipit vita Havelok quondam Rex Anglie et Denemarchie" ("here begins the life of Havelok, once king of England and Denmark"). Whetter has noted that it is likely that the word 'vita' here is 'scribal rather than authorial,' thus that it is the response of an early reader rather than of the author.<sup>711</sup> One of the most widely copied texts occurring in the same manuscript is the *South English Legendary* (*SEL*).<sup>712</sup> The *vitae* in the *SEL* show remarkably similar concerns to *Havelok*, which may

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<sup>708</sup> The name's first element, 'Athel,' means noble, and was therefore, unsurprisingly, a recurring and popular element in the names of pre-Conquest royal families. See, for instance: Catherine Cubitt, "Personal names, identity and family in Benedictine Reform England", in *Verwandschaft, Name und soziale Ordnung* (300–1000), ed. Steffen Patzold and Karl Ubl (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 223–242.

<sup>709</sup> Michael Prestwich, *Edward I* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 4. Prestwich also gives an overview here of the Henry III's devotion to his pre-Conquest predecessor.

<sup>710</sup> See, for instance, K.S. Whetter, "Gest and Vita, Folktale and Romance in *Havelok*", *Parergon* 20.2 (2003): 21–46. Whetter gives a concise overview of the genre and argues that, even with its hagiographical elements, the poem is still a romance.

<sup>711</sup> Whetter, "Gest and Vita", 37.

<sup>712</sup> The popularity of the *South English Legendary* is attested by the fact that, as Anne B. Thompson has noted, over 60 copies had been made by the late fifteenth century. Anne B. Thompson, *Everyday Saints and the Art of Narrative in the South English Legendary* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 3. Jill Frederick adds that the extant copies are of varying completeness, and that its history of circulation is difficult to trace, "particularly as individual manuscripts are widely scattered in date and provenance." Jill Frederick, "The *South English Legendary*: Anglo-Saxon saints and national identity", in *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-*

explain their inclusion in the same manuscript. The *vitae* show a concern with Englishness and political unity, and the sanctity of a ruler. Importantly, one of the *vitae* included here is that of Edward the Confessor.<sup>713</sup> As Bell has noted, the *vita* of Edward, and also Kenelm, show an idealised relationship between king and subjects, following the medieval European trend. In the *SEL*, this yields an “idealized view of the English state.”<sup>714</sup> Furthermore, the authors of the *SEL* made their stories of insular saints more ‘English:’ compared to the Latin *vitae*, they contain more specific English context (for instance place names).<sup>715</sup> This is similar to *Havelok* which, despite its main character being Danish, is focussed on England rather than Denmark, placing the story firmly not only in an *historical* English context, but also in a geographical one, as I will discuss below. Another *vita* in the *SEL* concerns St Wulfstan. Here, we also find a concern with Englishness, but it is specifically depicted as opposed to Norman rule. According to Jill Frederick, this *vita* contains anti-Norman sentiments.<sup>716</sup> Wulfstan’s *Life* “re-interprets the past in terms of the present, as the speaker recreates Wulfstan as an English patriot, almost a rebel priest, standing up to the immorality of the Norman usurper.”<sup>717</sup> This theme of usurpation, of legitimate kingship and the kind of behaviour that has to accompany it, echoes the themes of *Havelok*. As Bell concludes, “In the Laud manuscript *Havelok* reinforces the English themes found in the *SEL*: England is idealized as a unified country justly governed by one saintly ruler.”<sup>718</sup> *Havelok*’s manuscript context, therefore, allowed for a more hagiographical interpretation of the story. I agree with Bell and (following her conclusions) Eckert,<sup>719</sup> that *Havelok* is not just a romance, but more specifically a hagiographical romance.<sup>720</sup>

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*Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. D.G. Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 58–59.

<sup>713</sup> Edward’s *Vita* occurs, interestingly, after St Oswald’s, another pious and heroic pre-Conquest king.

<sup>714</sup> Kimberly Bell, “Resituating Romance: The Dialectics of Sanctity in MS Laud”, *Paragon* 25.1 (2008): 37.

<sup>715</sup> Bell, “Resituating Romance”, 35.

<sup>716</sup> Frederick, “The *South English Legendary*”, 64.

<sup>717</sup> Frederick, “The *South English Legendary*”, 65.

<sup>718</sup> Bell, “Resituating Romance”, 40.

<sup>719</sup> Eckert, “The Redemptive Hero and “Inconsistencies” in *Havelok the Dane*”, *Philology Quarterly* 94.3 (2015): 227.

<sup>720</sup> Bell, “Resituating Romance”, 28.

*Havelok*'s hagiographical aspect becomes tied to its pre-Conquest setting in the character of King Athelwold. Lambert and Weiler have commented on how medieval authors used the past:

They introduced fictional elements into a past known to be true. Whether explicitly or not, such renditions marked a particular period or point in history as either especially glorious or shameful, and in the process used it to uphold or reject certain values associated with that past, or sought to locate in a past known to be true antecedents for the norms and practices of the present.<sup>721</sup>

I suggest that in the case of *Havelok*, and arguably also the Arthurian texts of Chapter 3, almost the opposite is true; rather than inserting fiction in a 'true' past, the poet adds historical detail into the account of a fictional king's life. The name Athelwold would already have suggested English kings and saints to the audience.<sup>722</sup> For instance, Archbishop Athelwold of Winchester played an important part in the tenth-century monastic reform movement.<sup>723</sup> Indeed, when the poet describes King Athelwold on his deathbed, after he has summoned his earls, he specifically mentions Winchester as the location of his hall. Besides its connection with Archbishop Athelwold, Winchester also evokes pre-Conquest kingship: it was the location of King Alfred's royal palace, and "the premier city" of the kingdom of Wessex.<sup>724</sup>

Panne he weren comen alle  
Bifor þe king into the halle  
At Winchestre þer he lay,  
"Welcome", he seyde, "be ye ay!"<sup>725</sup> (ll. 156–159)

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<sup>721</sup> Lambert and Weiler, *How the Past was Used*, 21.

<sup>722</sup> Bell, "Resituating Romance", 40.

<sup>723</sup> See, for instance, Barbara Yorke, *Bishop Æthelwold: His Career and Influence* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997).

<sup>724</sup> Catherine Cubitt, "Pastoral Care and Religious Belief", in *A Companion to the Early Middle Ages: Britain and Ireland, c. 500–1100*, ed. Pauline Stafford (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 399.

<sup>725</sup> Kenneth Eckert, ed. and trans., *Middle English Romances in Translation: Amis and Amiloun, Athelston, Floris and Blancheflor, Havelok the Dane, King Horn, Sir Degare*. (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015), 144. All citations from the poem are from Eckert's edition.

Athelwold's concern in this passage is for his only child, his daughter Goldeboru. Battles has linked their (English) names to Peterborough Abbey, noting that Athelwold was the name of an abbot there, and Goldeboru another name for the abbey. Thus, Athelwold's concerns for his daughter and his desire to protect her could then be symbols of Archbishop Athelwold's desire to protect the abbey from the Norman invaders.<sup>726</sup> The sacking of Peterborough Abbey by Hereward the Wake (ostensibly to protect its treasures), then, further demonstrates the connection between rebellion against the Normans and *Havelok*, according to Battles. While the names of Athelwold and Goldeboru certainly seem to point to such a connection, it should also be noted that the Peterborough Chronicle does not appear to regard Hereward, and his sacking of the abbey, in such a favourable light. Indeed, Hereward and his men are called 'utlages' (outlaws), and while the chronicler does mention Hereward's reason, he does so begrudgingly after listing everything that was taken.<sup>727</sup> While the link with Peterborough Abbey is convincing, it does not necessarily follow that *Havelok* is a poem about rebellion against the Normans. This view would ignore the many elements of the poem that refer to more contemporary (Edwardian) concerns. Rather, the inclusion of Athelwold and the location of the court at Winchester seem part of a conscious attempt by the poet to set the story firmly in pre-Conquest England. This would help to remind an audience of Edward's namesake, the saint of the royal family, Edward the Confessor.<sup>728</sup> Athelwold's kingship is, then, based on a desire to link the just execution of royal authority with a pre-Conquest reimagined past and piety.

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<sup>726</sup> Battles, "Reconquering England", 195.

<sup>727</sup> Susan Irvine, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition*, vol. 7: *MS E*, gen. eds. David N. Dumville and Simon Keynes (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 88–89. This is the annal for the year 1070. Incidentally, it is the Peterborough Chronicle which directly refers to the abbey as Goldeboru, for the year 1066: "ƿa wearð Gildene Burh to Wrecce Burh" (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, MS E*, ed. Susan Irvine, 87), (then Golden Borough became Miserable Borough). The exclamation, however, is not related to the Normans, but to the death of abbot Leofric who, according to the chronicle, had greatly added to the abbey's wealth.

<sup>728</sup> As Prestwich has remarked, from at least 1308 (and probably also during Edward I's own coronation in 1274), the new king swore an oath in which he "agreed to maintain the laws of his predecessors, notably Edward the Confessor," thus demonstrating the royal family's devotion to the Confessor, while at the same time emphasising continuity between their royal authority and the authority, especially legal, of pre-Conquest England. Prestwich, *Edward I*, 90.

Athelwold's good kingship is highlighted at length at the beginning of the poem. The poet makes clear that he is telling a story, and frames it as an oral one.<sup>729</sup>

Herknet to me gode men  
 Wives maydnes and alle men  
 Of a tale þat ich you wile telle  
 Wo so it wile here and þer-to dwelle. (ll. 1–4).

Athelwold's description runs for about eighty lines and lists all of his qualities as a king. His characterisation here serves two purposes. Firstly, it provides the audience with a perfect king, who then contrasts the more sharply with the evil usurper Godric, emphasising Goldeboru's legitimate right to the throne. Secondly, and more specifically, I suggest the poet intended to play on an audience's nostalgic image of pre-Conquest kingship. This interpretation relies on several features. For instance, the poet only mentions the king's name at the very end. Instead, he starts with:

It was a king bi are dawes  
 That in his time were gode lawes  
 He dede maken an ful wel holden.  
 Hym lovede yung him lovede holde  
 Erl and barun dreng and kayn  
 Knict bondeman and swain  
 Wydues maydnes prestes and clerkes  
 And al for hise gode werkes.  
 He lovede God with al his micth  
 And holi kirke and soth ant ricth. (ll. 27–36).

The poet takes his audience back to a past which is not identified outwardly as pre-Conquest, but several clues (even before we learn that the King's name is the very English Athelwold) can point an audience in that direction. At the least, these clues suggest a

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<sup>729</sup> See, for example, Ananya Kabir, who argues that the poem's orality is "a deliberate literary construct." Anyana J. Kabir, "Forging an Oral Style? 'Havelok' and the Fiction of Orality", *Studies in Philology* 98.1 (Winter 2001): 20.

continuity of ideas about kingship. Sonya L. Veck has argued for a similar interpretation of the poem *King Horn*. Being "... perhaps the oldest surviving English romance, dating to about 1225–1285,"<sup>730</sup> *Horn* shares *Havelok*'s themes of exile and the reconquest of a rightful king's lands, but lacks the more in-depth concerns with good kingship and politics demonstrated in *Havelok*.<sup>731</sup> *Horn*, according to Veck, displays certain characteristics of an Old English oral tradition, one of which is its tone: "There is evidence in *King Horn* that a serious, contemplative tone remained in the literature after the Norman Conquest despite changes in genre and the movement toward Middle English."<sup>732</sup> Another feature Veck discusses is the importance of loyalty in *King Horn*, which was an important element in Old English literature, as previous chapters have discussed.<sup>733</sup> As I will discuss here, loyalty plays a significant part in *Havelok* too, though it should be noted that loyalty on its own is hardly suggestive of a pre-Conquest ideal finding its way into a post-Conquest poem. Loyalty to one's lord is, for instance, also a feature in early medieval French texts.<sup>734</sup> What makes *Havelok*'s concern with loyalty similar to pre-Conquest concerns is its emphasis on oaths, its portrayal of the relationship between a lord and his people, and the subsequent well-being of the kingdom. I will say more about this later.

A pre-Conquest feature which specifically stands out in *Havelok* is its focus on the law. The very first aspect of Athelwold's kingship mentioned by the poet relates to his good laws, which he says were obeyed by all. The new Norman rulers, especially from the twelfth century onwards, showed great interest in pre-Conquest law-codes. As Bruce O'Brien has observed, "The twelfth century as a whole has left more Anglo-Saxon lawbooks than all previous centuries combined."<sup>735</sup> Of specific interest to the Normans

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<sup>730</sup> Eckert, *Middle English Romances*, 209.

<sup>731</sup> As Eckert has noted, the focus of *Horn* is entirely on the eponymous protagonist. His suggestion that perhaps *Horn* also addresses Edward I and his reign, due to its descriptions of geographical boundaries, is highly speculative. Indeed, *Horn*, as the other rulers in the poem, is described in almost exclusively general words, and the poem's disinterest in the machinations of royal authority make it unlikely, in my view, to be directly concerned with Edward's reign. Eckert, *Middle English Romances*, 209–210.

<sup>732</sup> Sonya L. Veck, "Anglo-Saxon Oral Tradition and *King Horn*" (PhD diss., University of Colorado: 2006), 123.

<sup>733</sup> Veck, "Anglo-Saxon Oral Tradition", from page 144.

<sup>734</sup> See, for instance, the chansons de geste, specifically the chanson de Roland. Here, loyalty is closely tied to bravery.

<sup>735</sup> Bruce O'Brien, "Pre-Conquest Laws and Legislators in the Twelfth Century", in *The Long Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past*, ed. Martin Brett and D.A. Woodman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 232.

were the laws of Cnut and of Edward the Confessor.<sup>736</sup> Robert Rouse, based on arguments put forward by Anthony Musson, has observed that, from the twelfth century onwards, the idea of the English ‘Golden Age of the Law’ developed in England.<sup>737</sup> The chronicler William of Malmesbury, for instance, was crucial in establishing King Alfred as a founding father of English law.<sup>738</sup> This Anglo-Norman interest in pre-Conquest law raises the question why England’s new rulers turned to the laws of their predecessors, especially in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Susan Crane has noted that legal concerns in English romances show an increasing interest in English identity.<sup>739</sup> Richard Green has commented on the late Middle Ages’ “perceived degenerate state of the law,” noting that one way in which authors dealt with this was to look to the past for an idealised time for justice.<sup>740</sup> Thus, a complex legal system and a need for a shared identity, and an interest in Edward the Confessor (in particular here related to his laws), may have led authors such as the *Havelok* poet to highlight the importance of justice and the law. More importantly, however, I suggest that the fundamental preoccupation here is continuity. The post-Conquest interest in the laws of kings such as Alfred and Edward the Confessor show a desire for stability through legal continuity. This desire is represented in *Havelok* through Athelwold, the English king whose laws were not just good, but also fully obeyed.

The upholding of the law leads to peace and stability in the kingdom, and the poet next remarks on the safety the people enjoyed during Athelwold’s reign.

In that time a man þat bore  
 Wel fyfty pund y woth or more  
 Of red gold up-on hijs bac  
 In a male with or blac  
 Ne funde he non that him misseyde  
 Ne with ivele on hond leyde.

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<sup>736</sup> O’Brien, “Pre-Conquest Laws”, 233.

<sup>737</sup> Robert Allen Rouse, *The Idea of Anglo-Saxon England in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2005), 94.

<sup>738</sup> Simon Keynes, “The cult of King Alfred the Great”, *Anglo-Saxon England* 28 (January 1999): 225–356.

<sup>739</sup> Susan Crane, *Insular romance*, 86.

<sup>740</sup> Richard Green, “Medieval Literature and Law”, in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 418.



Panne micthe chapmen fare  
 Puruth Englonð wit here ware  
 And baldelike beye and sellen  
 Overal þer he wilen dwellen  
 In gode burwes and þer-fram. (ll. 45–54).

Providing protection is a fundamental aspect of good kingship. The poet's description here calls to mind the remarks of Bede on King Edwin, who ensured a peace and stability so strong that a woman could walk safely throughout the island with her baby.<sup>741</sup> In the case of Athelwold, however, the focus is more on economic prosperity, and a depiction of mercantile activities as a marker of stability.

Athelwold's third characteristic of good kingship is his generosity. The poet writes:

He was large and no wicth gnede.  
 Hauede he non so god brede  
 Ne on his bord non so god shrede  
 Þat he ne wolde þorwit fede  
 Poure þat on fote yede  
 Forto haven of Him þe mede  
 Þat for us wolde on rode blede  
 Crist that al kan wisse and rede  
 Þat evere woneth in ani þede.  
 Þe king was hoten Aþelwold. (ll. 97–106).

As discussed in chapters one and two, a king's generosity was a fundamental aspect of the reciprocal relationship between a king and his people. In Athelwold's case, however, his generosity is placed in a Christian framework, showing the king's piety. Again, the scene is reminiscent of Bede, in this case evoking his portrayal of King Oswald. Oswald, seated at dinner and being served from a silver dish, hears of the poor people gathered outside. Oswald orders the silver dish to be broken in pieces and to be handed out to the

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<sup>741</sup> Book II. 16.

poor.<sup>742</sup> In the case of Athelwold, the poet states openly that Athelwold displays this generosity for God's reward. Good kings, then, have to be generous, but at least for Athelwold the act is directly linked to piety, specifically the desire to be rewarded after death.

This piety is perhaps nowhere more visible than in Athelwold's death scene. The poet mentions that no man at court could find

So mikel men micte him in winde  
 Of his in arke ne in chiste  
 In Engelond þat noman wiste  
 For al was youen faire and wel  
 Þat him was leved no catel.  
 Þanne he hauede ben ofte swngen  
 Ofte shriven and ofte dungen  
 "In manus tuas Louerde", he seyde  
 Her þat he þe speche leyde.  
 To Jhesu Crist bigan to calle  
 And deyede biforn his heymen alle. (ll. 221–231).

Athelwold's lack of personal possessions connects him to monastic life, emphasising his humility and piety. According to Bell, with his dying words Athelwold "firmly aligns himself with the suffering Christ."<sup>743</sup> Furthermore, I would argue that it is certainly possible that a thirteenth-century audience would have seen a reference in this to the Anarchy, the struggle between Henry I's daughter, the Empress Matilda, and Stephen of Blois. On his deathbed, Athelwold has his earls swear an oath that they will support Goldeboru's claim to the throne. Godrich breaks his oath and takes the throne. Likewise, Henry I had made his earls promise they would support his daughter, an oath which was subsequently broken by many. I do not claim that the Middle English poet was original in including these potential references. Indeed, the earlier versions portray similar scenes,

<sup>742</sup> Book III.6, 230–231. Bede's description of Oswald shows similarities with both Athelwold and Havelok. Oswald was "always wonderfully humble, kind, and generous to the poor and to strangers" (231). This aligns the poem closely to a Christian view of kingship, and so supports Bell's classification of Havelok as a hagiographical romance.

<sup>743</sup> Bell, "Resituating Romance", 38.

and originally it may well have served as a reference to the betrayal of Edmund Ironside by Edric, in favour of the Danish Cnut.<sup>744</sup> The Danish associations of the poem should be kept in mind, considering its regional origins and eponymous hero. What these features show, however, is how events and characters, such as Athelwold, may have developed different meanings and been given varied interpretations as Havelok's tale was passed on to new generations and new authors with their own aims. Regarding the Middle English version specifically, I suggest that an association between Athelwold and Edward the Confessor is plausible not just because of their shared saintly qualities, but also because Havelok himself, as I will argue later, represents Edward I. Edward I's reign is then portrayed as a return to just and pious rule after a period of usurpation and instability.

Despite Athelwold's death at the beginning of the poem, the poet dedicates considerable attention to his character. Athelwold is presented as a perfect king, whose piety, generosity, and love for laws and justice provide a stark contrast with Godrich's rule. The manuscript context emphasises the religious character of *Havelok* in general and Athelwold in particular. A reinterpretation of the pre-Conquest past is important here, as it presents the audience with a vision of a past when law and justice were maintained, with stability and continuity as result. Athelwold's resemblance to Edward the Confessor, however, is not only based on piety, but on a wider vision of the political events leading up to the Norman Conquest. Thus, Edward the Confessor, through Athelwold, is presented as the protector of England, after whose death chaos ensues until the return of a legitimate king.

### 4.3. Goldeboru as England, Havelok as Edward I

The roles of Goldeboru and Havelok are equally symbolic in the poem, and I will argue that Goldeboru is presented as a personification of England and Havelok as Edward I, whose duty is to ensure her protection and well-being. After Athelwold's death Earl Godrich seizes power. The contrast between Godrich's and Athelwold's reign serves to highlight the latter's good kingship. Earl Godrich imprisons Goldeboru at Dover. The poet then shifts his attention to Havelok, and it becomes clear that Goldeboru's and Havelok's circumstances run parallel to each other. Havelok is the son of King Birkabeyn

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<sup>744</sup> As argued by Thorlac Turville-Petre, "Havelok and the History", 132. Turville-Petre states that this is referenced in Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*.

of Denmark who, on his deathbed, asks his best friend, Earl Godard, to look after Havelok and his two sisters until Havelok is old enough to become king himself. Godard swears to do so, but locks up the children immediately after the king's death, killing the two girls but not being able, out of guilt, to kill Havelok. He orders the fisherman Grim to kill the young prince instead. However, when Grim and his wife see a shaft of light come out of Havelok's mouth at night, they take it as a sign that he is the heir to the throne and decide to save him. Together with their own family they flee to Lindsay, in England.<sup>745</sup> The poet remarks that the location of their settlement is still called Grimsby today. Havelok grows up in modest circumstances, and distinguishes himself by eating enormous amounts of food, growing exceptionally tall and strong, and becoming a cook's help. Godard notices him due to his great height and strength, and marries him to Goldeboru in order to weaken her claim to the throne. Glossing over the similar flame from the mouth, and a trip to Grimsby up north, Havelok rediscovers who he is, and Goldeboru comes to love him once she knows he is a rightful king. They travel to Denmark, capturing Godard who is tried for his treason and killed. Back in England they also defeat Godrich, and Havelok and Goldeboru reign as king and queen, uniting England and Denmark under one legitimate authority.

With the protection of one's land and people as a key feature of good kingship, I suggest that, when it comes to the regaining and protection of land and inheritance in the poem, it is actually Goldeboru who plays a very important part, in fact much more so than in the earlier versions. Her name itself implies, as scholars have noted,<sup>746</sup> something that is precious. Indeed, her role is expanded in the Middle English version of the poem, in which she is reinterpreted as a parallel for England itself. Havelok, as Edward I's counterpart, then becomes Goldeboru's/England's rightful protector. Rather than being mainly an instrument for Havelok to claim England, however, Goldeboru takes centre stage as a symbol of what royal authority entails. I will discuss four features that support this reading of the text: Athelwold's own concerns for his daughter, Havelok's similarities to Edward I, the portrayal of Goldeboru, and the importance of the law.

First, the dying king demonstrates that his primary concern is with the future of his daughter Goldeboru:

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<sup>745</sup> The area where the story was set originally.

<sup>746</sup> See, for instance, William Sayers, "The Names of the Legendary Hero Haveloc the Dane", *French Studies Bulletin* 40.149 (2019): 2.

And seyde, "Crist wat shal y don?  
 Louerd wat shal me to rede?  
 I woth ful wel ich have mi mede  
 Hw shal nou mi douhter fare?  
 Of hire have ich michel kare  
 Sho is mikel in mi þouth;  
 Of me self is me rith nowt. (ll. 117–123)

Goldeboru is Athelwold's only child, and the lack of an heir, particularly a male one, is an important feature of medieval literature, and reminiscent of *Beowulf*. At her father's death, Goldeboru is young and unmarried, and thus without protection. Both England and Goldeboru, then, are facing an uncertain future.

As noted above, Athelwold then asks his earls and barons to swear an oath that they acknowledge Goldeboru as rightful heir, and on this occasion the parallel is referenced more explicitly:

And seyde, "Þat greting helpeth nouth  
 For al to dede am ich brouth.  
 Bute now ye sen þat i shal deye  
 Nou ich wille you alle preye  
 Of mi douthther þat shal be  
 Yure leuedi after me.  
 Wo may yemen hire so longe  
 Bopen hire and Engelsonde  
 Til þat she mowe winan of helde (ll. 166–174)

Athelwold's words here specifically address the fact that both Goldeboru and England need to be protected, and Godrich's treachery thus affects both adversely. Godrich rules in stark contrast to Athelwold, with the poet emphasising the tyranny of his rule. Additionally, he uses the description of his reign to emphasise the national, rather than local, character of his version:

Al Engelsond of him stod awe.

Al Engeland was of him adrad (ll. 277–278)

After the description detailing the negative effects of Godrich's rule on the whole country, we hear how well Goldeboru had been doing up to that point, just as England had been doing well under Athelwold. Godrich, however, has her locked up in poverty in Dover, this way again mirroring the new situation of England in contrast to when it was under Athelwold's rulership: scared, poor, and suffering.

Having related the similar circumstances surrounding Havelok, who is now a kitchen servant in the earl's household, the poet tells of Godrich's decision to marry Havelok to Goldeboru. The similarities between Havelok and Edward I have often been discussed. The most obvious is arguably the continuous references to Havelok's height, which would have reminded an audience of the notoriously tall Edward.<sup>747</sup> This height appears to be a specific concern of the Middle English text. As Eckert has noted, Godrich specifically claims he only promised the king to find the 'hexte' (highest) husband for Goldeboru.<sup>748</sup> Godrich uses the double meaning of 'hexte' here to select Havelok as Goldeboru's husband due to his height, whereas Athelwold had intended Goldeboru to marry someone of high *status*. Thus, Godrich sees here a perfect opportunity to keep to the letter of his oath, though not to its spirit. On the contrary, in the *Lai*, Godrich is only asked to find the princess the *strongest* husband. Another, arguably more significant, similarity between Havelok and Edward relates to the fraught relationship between Edward and his barons. The late 1290s were a time of financial crisis, as Edward needed increasingly more money and men to fight his wars.<sup>749</sup> As Michael Prestwich has noted, Edward often had issues securing his earls' cooperation for his military campaigns, such as the 1297 expedition to Flanders.<sup>750</sup> In *Havelok*, both of the earls are portrayed as evil: "a central theme of *Havelok the Dane* appears to be that rebellious earls represent a serious threat to monarchies, and therefore to the health and happiness of nations."<sup>751</sup> Thus, the poem repurposes the role of the evil earl to highlight the importance of loyalty

<sup>747</sup> David Staines, "Havelok the Dane: A Thirteenth-Century Handbook for Princes", *Speculum* 51.4 (Oct. 1976): 622.

<sup>748</sup> Eckert, "The Redemptive Hero", 236.

<sup>749</sup> Stuart, "*Havelok the Dane* and Edward", 350.

<sup>750</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 562. Prestwich also warns against seeing too much opposition and tension in the relationship between Edward and the nobility. Some were loyal throughout, while others periodically objected to Edward's excessive demands.

<sup>751</sup> Stuart, "*Havelok the Dane* and Edward", 356.

and oaths for the well-being of the kingdom. This theme of reciprocity, of the importance of upholding the balance of mutual dependency between a king and his closest men, was also significant to the authors of *Beowulf* and the Alfredian Group, as we have seen. The *Havelok* poet emphasises this point further in his focus on Havelok's appetite. As Daniel Murtaugh has noted, Edward I increased purveyances to fund his military campaigns in the period when *Havelok* was written.<sup>752</sup> He convincingly argues that the poem serves as a defence of the royal prerogative of purveyance, embodied through Havelok's continuous hunger.<sup>753</sup> His hunger develops in his childhood, when he is almost starved to death by Godard (e.g. l. 474) and Grim (e.g. ll. 639–647). When Grim and his wife, Leve, decide to save Havelok, the poet describes in detail the food Leve sets in front of him and how Havelok eats ravenously (ll. 649–663). When Havelok finds employment with Godrich's cook, he states that “Bidde ich you non oþer hire / But yeueþ me inow to ete.” (ll. 917–918). Indeed, Havelok's reason for leaving Grimsby is that the town is hit by famine, and Grim advises him to go to Lincoln as “mayt þi mete winne” (l. 859). Importantly, as Murtaugh notes, the poet portrays Havelok's hunger as having positive effects for the country:

Magically, satisfying Havelok's hunger is not just a draw upon the plenty of the countryside and the coastal waters of England, but a source of that same plenty, suggesting the identity of the king's body and its sustenance with that of the nation.<sup>754</sup>

In other words, Havelok deserves to be fed as much as he wants, because he works hard for those who feed him. As the earl's cook exclaims, after Havelok has promised him to work hard and do all he asks: “Dapeit hwo þe mete werne!” (l. 933) The cook's words demonstrate how, according to the poet, the relationship between Havelok and those who feed him (and by extension between Edward and those who pay him) benefits not only the receiver but also the giver. Royal authority, then, can only protect and serve a country if the people are willing to deliver their share. The poet's description of Havelok and

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<sup>752</sup> Murtaugh, “*Havelok the Dane*”, 478. On the same page, he defines purveyance as “the king's right to buy or borrow at will from his subjects of all ranks foodstuffs and other provisions for the royal household.”

<sup>753</sup> Murtaugh, “*Havelok the Dane*”, 477.

<sup>754</sup> Murtaugh, “*Havelok the Dane*”, 479.

Goldeboru's relationship reinforces the idea that Edward, in the guise of Havelok, has the interests of England at heart.

The relationship between the protagonists, however, does not begin well. Godrich's decision to have Goldeboru and Havelok married does not appeal to either of the future spouses. Goldeboru, having high standards, does not wish to marry someone who is not of her rank. Havelok does not want to marry at all, as he, humbly, feels he cannot support a wife. Their protests are to no avail, however. I consider it significant that immediately after the wedding Havelok becomes very protective of Goldeboru, worrying first about staying at Godrich's court:

And yf he dwelleden þer outh  
 Þat fel Havelok ful wel on þouth.  
 Men sholde don his leman shame  
 Or elles bringen in wicke blame.  
 Þat were him levere to ben ded. (ll. 1196–1200).

Havelok is concerned with the wellbeing of his wife as soon as she 'belongs' to him. Similarly, a king would have been responsible for the well-being of his country as soon as he was crowned.<sup>755</sup> Moreover, Havelok demonstrates he would rather die than see his wife harmed, just as a king's death for his country would be the ultimate sacrifice.

In fact, as Havelok continues to express concern over his wife's honour practically everywhere they go, I would suggest these passages can again be seen as a parallel for England and Edward I. This way, the poet once again emphasises that Edward is England's protector, and that his actions, like Havelok's, are always concerned with England's prosperity. Indeed, when the couple arrive at the castle of Ubbe in Denmark, Ubbe, a Danish nobleman, promises to protect Goldeboru and ensure no shame comes to her. However:

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<sup>755</sup> As Robert Bartlett has observed, the coronation was the start of the king's rule, not the death of his predecessor. In the case of Edward, however, rule started after the death of his father, Henry III, due to Edward's absence on crusade. In fact, as Henry had died in 1272 and Edward crowned in 1274, there were two years between the death of the former and the coronation of the new king. Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings, 1075–1225* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 123. The immediate start of Edward's rule also explains why, as Prestwich notes, his journey back to England was a 'leisurely' one. Prestwich, *Edward I*, 82.



Havelok herde þat he bad  
 And thow was he ful sore drad  
 With him to ete for hise wif  
 For him wore levere þat his lif  
 Him wore reft þan she in blame  
 Felle or lauthe ani shame. (ll. 1513–1518)

Once more, the poet emphasises that Havelok's dedication to Goldeboru's safety is so great that he would give his life for her.

Despite other powerful people pledging to protect Goldeboru, Havelok does not entrust them with her care. The continued insistence on Havelok's unease and concerns over Goldeboru invite the audience to think of her as personification of England, and Havelok as Edward I, the king who would rather die than see his country suffer. Interestingly, Grim's sons, Havelok's loyal supporters, mirror Havelok in their care and concern for Goldeboru, and in doing so portray the behaviour of a perfect noble:

Un-to þe heye curt he yede.  
 Roberd hire ledde þat was red  
 Þat hauede þarned for hire þe ded  
 Or ani hauede hire misseyd  
 Or hand with jvele onne leyd. (ll. 1530–1534)

This passage is significant as, like Ubbe, Grim's sons are also protective towards Goldeboru. Crucially, they act on Havelok's orders, and are therefore trusted to protect her —only Havelok has the authority to decide who he can trust to defend his wife. In return, their loyalty is such that they, too, are willing to die for Goldeboru's safety. Havelok, then, is not only concerned with regaining what is rightfully his, namely the throne, but also with providing protection for those who have been entrusted to his care. To ensure this protection, he needs to be able to rely on his men to follow his orders. Havelok is continuously concerned for the safety of Goldeboru, whose name is associated throughout the poem with England itself. A contemporary audience would have been encouraged to appreciate the similarities between Havelok and Edward I, and to interpret Havelok's actions as in the country's best interest.

The importance of the law has been discussed already, specifically regarding Athelwold and the poet's focus on justice during his reign. Indeed, as the poem progresses, the role of the law becomes more pervasive and significant. Havelok of course has to deal with the two evil earls, and law rather than vengeance characterises the resolution of the text. As Rodger Wilkie has noted, Havelok's behaviour is in direct opposition to that of the usurpers,<sup>756</sup> and there is an emphasis on his lawful practices.<sup>757</sup> Havelok, then, becomes an image of lawful kingship which, together with his similarities to Edward I, serves to support Edward's behaviour and praise his respect for justice and the law.

There is continuity in the way post-Conquest kings valued the importance of the law just as their pre-Conquest counterparts had done. As A.L. Brown has remarked on the post-Conquest attitude towards the law, stating that "a lawless king was not a true king."<sup>758</sup> Similarly, as chapter one and two have discussed, kings did not simply make law, but also used it as a symbol of their royal authority. The law-codes, for instance, show the close connection between law and kingship.<sup>759</sup> The fact that a king *could* make law was an indication of power. In addition, the king came to be seen as a judge in the execution of his own justice, a role which King Alfred seemed to take on willingly, as I have argued in chapter two. Nonetheless, while there is a sense of continuity, there were certainly changes too. While the early continental kings did not legislate, and "...Kings as explicit legislators are one more symptom of Romanisation,"<sup>760</sup> influenced by the Carolingians, post-Conquest law-making and maintaining were different. This becomes clear in *Havelok the Dane*. As important as the law is for kingship in the poem, no king is ever said to *make* law, nor to act as a judge, as King Alfred had done. Rather, like King Arthur, the king is presented as its keeper, as the law's protector against hostile influences

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<sup>756</sup> Roger I. Wilkie, "Re-Capitulating the Body Politic: The Overthrow of Tyrants in *Havelok the Dane*", *Neophilologus* 94 (2010): 142.

<sup>757</sup> Wilkie, "Re-Capitulating the Body Politic", 143.

<sup>758</sup> A.L. Brown, *The Governance of Late Medieval England: 1272–1461* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 17.

<sup>759</sup> Pauline Stafford, "The Laws of Cnut and the History of Anglo-Saxon Royal Promises", *ASE* 10 (1982 for 1981): 173.

<sup>760</sup> Patrick Wormald, "Kings and Kingship", in *The New Cambridge Medieval History: Part III: Themes and Problems*, ed. Paul Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 599.

seeking to undermine the kingdom by undermining justice. Havelok's own role in the judicial process, after the earls have been defeated, demonstrates this.

The first person to face justice is Godard, in Denmark. Ubbe, the Danish lord who looks after Havelok and Goldeboru during their stay, realises who Havelok is and orders the other lords to follow his example and swear allegiance to him:

In al þis werd ne haues he per.  
 Non so fayr ne non so long  
 Ne non so mikel ne non so strong.  
 In þis middelerd nis no knith  
 Half so strong ne half so with.  
 Bes of him ful glad and bliþe  
 And cometh alle hider swiþe  
 Manrede youre louerd forto make  
 Boþe brune and þe blake. (ll. 2086–2094).

Ubbe's words do not need repeating, and everyone present swears oaths of loyalty to Havelok. What is especially interesting here is the use of the formulaic expression of support for the king from all ranks. The same was true for Athelwold, who was loved by all of his people, whatever their social status. A legitimate king, the poet suggests, demands and receives loyalty from all groups in society, not only those of high rank. In the case of *Havelok* this means that he manages to unite the country under his leadership. This kind of united action is important for the maintenance of the law, as justice needs to be done regardless of rank. Indeed, the universality of the law becomes clear when Godard is captured. During and immediately after his capture, Havelok's men severely beat and humiliate the usurping earl. When he arrives before Havelok, however, the law takes over.

Wan he was so shamelike  
 Biforn þe king þe fule swike  
 Þe king dede Ubbe swiþe calle  
 Hise erles and hise barouns alle  
 Dreng and thein burgeis and knith  
 And bad he sholden demen him rith  
 For he kneu þe swike dam.

Everildel God was him gram!  
 He setten hem dun bi þe wawe  
 Riche and pouere heye and lowe  
 Þe helde men and ek þe grom  
 And made þer þe rithe dom.  
 And seyden unto þe king anon  
 Þat stille sat so þe ston  
 “We deme þat he be al quic slawen  
 “And siþen to þe galwes drawe  
 At þis foule mere tayl Facing this foul mare’s tail, with a  
 Þoru is fet a ful strong nayl Good strong harness through his feet,  
 And þore ben hinged wit two feteres (ll. 2307–2325)

While Godard’s punishment consists of humiliation and a rather gruesome death, Havelok himself remains notably absent from the legal process. Indeed, the poet specifies that he is as still as a stone. It is the people, of all ranks together, who pronounce Godard’s sentence. Havelok, as the highest judge, is in this instance a convenor of the court. Godrich’s trial is slightly different. After four years in Denmark, Goldeboru urges her husband to travel back to England to reclaim her inheritance. It should be noted here that Havelok’s four-year absence from England is reminiscent of Edward I’s four-year absence while on crusade.<sup>761</sup> The poet’s intention, I suggest, may well have been to create this further link between the two kings in order to strengthen their respective claims of authority.

Godrich’s reaction to Havelok’s return demonstrates the difference between legitimate and illegitimate kingship. When Godrich orders his men to attack, they follow his orders because “he him dredde swiþe sore” (l. 2433). As we have seen, Havelok does not need to terrify his people into following him; they are convinced he is the legitimate ruler and thus follow him willingly and loyally. An illegitimate reign, the poet suggests here, is one spurred on by fear rather than loyalty. Havelok highlights the importance of such loyalty himself, after the English earls have surrendered and recognised their mistake in not supporting Goldeboru, and beg for mercy:

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<sup>761</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 66–85.

Quot Havelok, "Hwan þat ye it wite.  
 Nu wile ich þat ye down site  
 And after Godrich haues wrouht  
 Þat haues in sorwe him-self brouth  
 Lokes þat ye demen him rith  
 For dom ne spared clerk ne knith.  
 And siþen shal ich under-stonde  
 Of you after lawe of londe  
 Manrede and holde oþes bope  
 Yif ye it wilen and ek rothe". (ll. 2673–2682)

Eckert has noted that in this passage "the poet emphasizes that Havelok respects the rule of law as his father did by submitting both Godard and Godrich to a trial."<sup>762</sup> While Havelok does clearly respect the rule of law, I suggest he follows Athelwold more than his own father here. In the end, the poem is about kingship in England more than Denmark. Most of the action takes place in England, and the poem opens with Athelwold's rule and ends with Havelok and Goldeboru's rule in England. Havelok, then, is portrayed as Athelwold's legitimate and worthy successor. In line with Havelok's earlier role in Godard's trial, he again makes it clear that the judgment is not in his hands but in that of the people. They may not be impartial, but "period juries were chosen for their knowledge of the case and not for their objectivity."<sup>763</sup> Nonetheless, while Havelok may leave the judgment to the subjects in both cases, the fact that he can do so demonstrates his authority. He is in a position to decide not just who is judged, but also who they are judged by. Havelok's (and Edward's) court is effectively also the highest court of law: this is where justice was done.<sup>764</sup> The king himself is the highest judge,<sup>765</sup> but here Havelok appoints others to pronounce the actual judgment. According to Rodger Wilkie, the fact that Havelok is not present at the trials shows conformity to the "legal theory of the age."<sup>766</sup> The poet, then, takes great care to portray Havelok as exercising his authority according to thirteenth-century procedure. Unlike many pre-Conquest kings,

<sup>762</sup> Eckert, *Middle English Romances*, 204.

<sup>763</sup> Eckert, *Middle English Romances*, 204.

<sup>764</sup> Stuart, "Havelok the Dane and Edward", 360.

<sup>765</sup> Stuart, "Havelok the Dane and Edward", 361.

<sup>766</sup> Wilkie, "Re-Capitating the Body Politic", 143.

Havelok does not take on the role of judge. Rather, he is presented as the guardian of law and justice, one who does not make the law but does maintain and protect it.

This depiction of the legal process reflects contemporary developments. The legal process underwent significant changes during Edward I's reign although, as Prestwich has observed, there was no wider vision of transformation of the law behind it.<sup>767</sup> The focus of Edward's legislation seems to have been to ensure issues could be solved more quickly and effectively.<sup>768</sup> It is important to note here that there is no evidence to suggest that Edward himself was involved in the process of drawing up new legislation. However, it is likely that he was behind the "overall direction of policy."<sup>769</sup> The later years of Edward's reign, specifically from the 1290s onwards, saw increasing challenges in the maintenance of the law.<sup>770</sup> The absence of the king and his closest men, engaged with warfare abroad, encouraged criminality at the time *Havelok* was written. Indeed, some writers had even begun to use the example of King Arthur against Edward, and some of the chronicler Langtoft's accusations towards the king relate to the law and justice.<sup>771</sup> Edward "gave his trust to criminals" and acted according to his will, rather than taking proper counsel."<sup>772</sup> England's issues with the rule of law, then, appear to coincide with *Havelok* and its concern for justice and proper legal procedure.

A final feature regarding the role of the law in the poem needs to be noted, and it is concerned with the poem's reimagining of the pre-Conquest past. In all of the passages dealing with the legal process cited above, no writing is involved. Eckert has observed that "...legal process in the poem favors Anglo-Saxon speech acts over Norman written authority."<sup>773</sup> He adds that Havelok's authority is a spoken one, and that books feature more as religious 'ceremonial objects' rather than as material that can convey royal authority. In Eckert's view, then, the poem's spoken legal authority suggests an affinity with pre-Conquest practice. While many elements, as discussed, point to a deliberate retelling of the story in a pre-Conquest setting, I would suggest that in this respect the poet has a different aim. After all, pre-Conquest legislation would have been very much associated with the written word, especially since law-codes from this period were so

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<sup>767</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 560.

<sup>768</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 270.

<sup>769</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 270.

<sup>770</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 283.

<sup>771</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 560.

<sup>772</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 560.

<sup>773</sup> Eckert, "The Redemptive Hero", 228.

widely copied and distributed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Rather, Havelok's spoken authority allows the poet to demonstrate two things: the direct effect of his royal power, as we can see how his words are obeyed immediately, and the cooperative nature of Havelok's kingship. Just as Edward I was concerned with his parliament's consent,<sup>774</sup> Havelok is presented as the opposite of the usurpers because he seeks his counsellors' advice.<sup>775</sup> Most importantly, however, Havelok's oral authority allows him to include men of all ranks. As we have seen, Havelok is keen to include men from all ranks in the legal process, underlining the poem's message that it is important for a king to gain the loyalty and support of all of his men, regardless of their social standing. This interest in justice and cooperation also demonstrates the king's masculinity. As Katherine Lewis has noted, justice "provided an essential counterweight to the king's martial aspect in lending him wisdom and prudence. It also ensured that he would treat all of his subjects fairly and impartially, rewarding or punishing them according to merit."<sup>776</sup> In this, the poet may have looked back to Edward I's early reign, to the commissioning of the Hundred Rolls. The aim of this national inquest, which took place just after Edward's coronation, between late 1274 and early 1275, was "to investigate rights and liberties taken from the king, the excesses of sheriffs and other royal officials, and the misdeeds of private bailiffs."<sup>777</sup> *Havelok* expresses similar concerns with the rights of the king, and the misdeeds of those who had sworn to do his bidding during his absence, but had broken their oaths. Indeed, the inquest coincided with the replacement of high-level officials, and a new oath which stressed the end of "usurpations of royal right" and better and more equal treatment of the people.<sup>778</sup> At a time when Edward's royal prerogatives and authority were under attack, the *Havelok* poet may well have seen fit to remind his audience of Edward's earlier legal reforms. He stresses that the king's demands are all for the good of the people and the country, and that justice and the law are still of the utmost concern to royal authority.

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<sup>774</sup> Stuart, "Havelok the Dane and Edward", 352.

<sup>775</sup> Wilkie, "Re-Capitating the Body Politic", 142.

<sup>776</sup> Lewis, *Kingship and Masculinity*, 23.

<sup>777</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 94.

<sup>778</sup> Prestwich, *Edward I*, 93.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

*Havelok the Dane* is a dynamic text, encompassing many narrative traditions, which may refer to several historical contexts. I have argued that those elements referring to, for instance, King Cnut and the integration of Danish settlers in East Anglia may be remnants of earlier adaptations of the story. The extent to which the tale has been adapted depended, unsurprisingly, on the author's aims. Thus, Gaimar kept his story local to Lincoln, where he likely encountered the story and where his patrons had interests. The Middle English poet's decision to set the story in a wider English context is strengthened by the fact that he mentions 'England' thirty-nine times.<sup>779</sup> That Denmark is mentioned almost as often as England is not surprising,<sup>780</sup> but the focus is still very much on England. As mentioned, the poem begins and ends with England, creating a circular narrative in which one good king is succeeded, in the end, by another good king.

What makes these kings good kings in the poem is a variety of elements at the same time similar and different to those discussed in earlier chapters. As I have argued here, *Havelok's* poet is concerned with reflecting on and defending the reign of Edward I in his later years, when his royal authority faced many challenges. Many of these issues are important themes in the poem. Thus, both Havelok and Athelwold are concerned with justice and the law. At the core of this concern, however, is their relationship with their people. Both are loved by their subjects, regardless of rank, and those who do revolt belong to the nobility — a feature which would have been familiar to Edward. Both kings are also known for their piety and innocence, and the poem's hagiographical character points to a poet who would like his audience to make the connection with Edward the Confessor. It is Havelok, however, whose relationship with his people is shown to be one of reciprocity: the king and his people are in a symbiotic relationship, dependent on each other for the kingdom's peace and stability. Havelok's endless hunger needs to be satisfied, but the result is a king who can defend his people. Similarly, Edward required his people's loyalty (especially of the financial kind), and in return could be a king who

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<sup>779</sup> Diane Speed, "The Construction of the Nation in Medieval English Romance", in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1994), 149. The fact that the Middle English *Havelok* is the first extant version to use a national setting is, of course, not evidence that earlier (lost) versions didn't do the same. However, if this was the case then the new setting served the poet very well indeed, and he makes extensive use of it.

<sup>780</sup> 38 times, in fact. Speed, "The Construction", 150.



put his subjects' needs first. I have suggested here that Goldeboru plays a more significant part than previously recognised. In the parallel stories of England and Denmark, and Goldeboru and Havelok, the English princess is represented as England itself. When under illegitimate rule she suffers, but Havelok's treatment of her, worthy of her name signalling something precious,<sup>781</sup> shows a protectiveness which allows her to return to her former glory. Thus, *Havelok* shares several concerns surrounding royal authority with pre-Conquest literature: a focus on law, the relationship between a lord and subjects, and the loyalty, generosity, and swearing of oaths that provide the foundation of this relationship. The way these characteristics are used, however, differs. Havelok does not legislate, he simply maintains the law, incorporating it into the relationship with his people as he allows *them* to decide what justice ultimately means —while keeping an eye on proceedings from a distance. In this way Edward I is portrayed as a king who wishes to cooperate with all of his people, not just the nobility. As Stuart has noted, "*Havelok the Dane* tells the story of a king's reassertion of his authority."<sup>782</sup> Through Havelok, Edward I is shown to be a king whose God-given rule is one of reciprocity, but whose primary concern is always the well-being of his country.

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<sup>781</sup> Similar to her name in the previous versions, 'Argentille.'

<sup>782</sup> Stuart, "*Havelok the Dane* and Edward", 361.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, I have demonstrated that notions of kingship in medieval English literature did not die with the Norman Conquest. While the Conquest brought many changes, the new elite's interest in England's past provided contemporary writers with the incentive to explore this past, and to reimagine it to serve their own, and their audience's, needs. This does not mean that the Conquest did not precipitate change; rather, these changes were part of a process already discernible in pre-Conquest England, such as the increased concern with the law. This interest in the potential of the law for a king's authority was, as I have shown, already present in ninth-century Wessex. However, what changed was the exact nature of this importance, as post-Conquest literature such as Layamon's *Brut* and *Havelok the Dane* reimaged pre-Conquest law as more closely connected to the land. Narratives of kingship, then, were already subject to change before the Normans arrived in 1066, as authors used literary texts to reflect and respond to contemporary concerns with the assertion and nature of a king's authority.

I began this thesis with a citation from Edward I's Justification of Taxation, composed in 1297. Edward's letter was a reply to his nobles, who had expressed concern about the additional burdens placed on them by the king in order to finance his campaign against France. The relevance of this text to the present study lies in Edward's self-presentation as ideal king, who is maligned by forces that attempt to alienate his people from him. At the heart of his letter was, as I noted, Edward's emphasis on cooperation between a king and his people, each performing according to their roles in society for the kingdom's well-being. This idea, that at the heart of good kingship lies the proper maintenance of this relationship, is found consistently throughout the four case studies discussed in this thesis. However, it should be noted that the fact that Edward wrote such a letter defending his actions was, in and of itself, a post-Conquest development. As I have discussed, King Alfred also appealed to his people — the prefaces to the *Pastoral Care* and the *Soliloquies*, and Asser's *Life* of the king attest to this. Crucially, however, Alfred addressed the higher ranks of his subjects: his bishops, in order to encourage them to spread learning; and his ealdormen, to highlight the importance of their support in the face of difficulties. Edward's letter too is a reply to concerns expressed by his nobles, but there is a significant difference: he appears to address all of his subjects together. He

speaks of the “welfare of all the people of his realm,” their “common profit,” and the burdens he has placed on his people.

This insistence on shared welfare and well-being is reflected in the discussion of *Havelok the Dane*, which dates to Edward’s reign. *Havelok*’s narrative emphasises that all the people love the (legitimate) king, whose just rule and regard for the law demonstrate the fulfillment of his duties towards the stability and peace of his kingdom. While this was a common convention in medieval romance, I suggest that, compared to pre-Conquest and early post-Conquest literature dealing with kingship, its insistence on the subjects’ devotion towards their king is novel. The main conclusion to be drawn from this study, then, is that conceptions of kingship remained mostly stable, but that the way these conceptions were interpreted and reflected in literary texts changed gradually. Thus, we find that the importance of the mutually beneficial relationship between a king and his people remained, but that the interpretation of who exactly constituted ‘the people’ moved from a relatively select group of retainers to potentially every single one of the king’s subjects.

This focus on a relatively small group of followers was an important aspect of kingship in *Beowulf* in chapter one. A king’s relationship with his people is important, the *Beowulf* poet made clear, for the stability and well-being of his kingdom. This relationship is ideally fostered from a young age, so that a prince grows up aware of his duties, and cultivates relationships based on generosity and loyalty that will serve him later. I have suggested that the poet’s presentation of kingship is complex. *Beowulf* is, at its heart, a poem about ‘wyrd,’ about changing circumstances, and the need for a good king to adapt as well as he can to these circumstances. The poem’s good kings, I have argued, are good kings because they demonstrate that they possess wisdom, which in the context of the poem means an ability to learn from the past and use that knowledge to prepare for the future. Many factors can contribute to a king’s failure to protect his people: in Hrothgar’s case it is old age, but it is pride that is the most dangerous of all shortcomings. In the case of Beowulf’s own kingship, I have argued that it is this pride in facing the dragon on his own (and without having safeguarded the succession) which severs the connection with his men. In other words, he creates a fatal imbalance in the mutually beneficial relationship with his men, leading to the predicted end of his dynasty and kingdom.

The Alfredian texts in chapter two show awareness of the importance of this relationship, but from a different point of view. Here, I argued that Alfredian writers

adapted and recreated a notion of kingship that suited the political turmoil of ninth-century Wessex. In all of the texts discussed, the relationship between a king and his people is emphasised, and the king's authority asserted. In the *Pastoral Care*, the starting point of the king's educational programme, Alfred asserts his authority by presenting himself as a teacher, to both his secular and ecclesiastical subjects. The idea of kingship as predicated on a well-balanced relationship between a king and his people becomes most clear in the Old English *Boethius* and the *Soliloquies*, where we find an emphasis on cooperation in the collection of knowledge and wisdom, and on the tools needed to keep the kingdom secure. Wisdom in the Alfredian texts, however, is not the same as the wisdom of the *Beowulf* poet. Rather than being centred on knowledge of past, in order to prepare for the future, Alfred and his authors reshaped and refocussed the ideal of royal wisdom to refer specifically to gaining knowledge and, most importantly, disseminating this knowledge throughout the kingdom. Following biblical examples such as that of Solomon, Alfred's role as king was re-envisioned as that of a teacher. His students owed him their obedience and loyalty and were rewarded with the king's generosity. Alfredian authors' reshaping of the king's role was a reaction to contemporary political and military struggles. I suggest they tell us directly how they approached this task of reshaping kingship; in the preface to the *Soliloquies*, the author uses the metaphor of gathering materials to build a house, a metaphor for the gathering of knowledge. I suggest that this metaphor also reflects the king's approach to the construction of new ideals of kingship. Alfred, with his scholars, has gathered information about kingship from multiple sources, such as the reign of Charlemagne, and the biblical David and Solomon, and they have selected what served them best. Thus, the resulting Alfredian conception of kingship may not have been constructed from original elements—as I have shown, Alfredian ideas are constructed from Carolingian, biblical, and heroic models of leadership. However, the exact recomposition of these ideas was very original indeed, and resulted in a renewed conception of kingship befitting ninth-century Wessex and its challenges.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 has often been presented as a watershed moment. As I have discussed in chapter three, viewing the Conquest as an abrupt break between English and Norman kingship and culture oversimplifies a more complex picture. Elaine Treharne has challenged the idea that Old English literature and language died after the Conquest,<sup>783</sup> and in my third chapter I argued that ideas about kingship also survived.

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Treharne, *Living Through Conquest*, 2.

These ideas did not survive unaltered, however, and were the result of a process of adaptation and resurrection by such writers as Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, and Layamon. Geoffrey's *Historia*, specifically the passage on King Arthur, shows an interest in unity and cooperation in times of war and struggle which Alfredian authors in ninth-century Wessex would have understood well. I have argued against the assertion that Geoffrey was uninterested in personal relationships, and proposed an understanding of the *Historia*'s Arthuriad as emphasising the importance of the relationship between lord and subjects as crucial for a kingdom's success. Wace's *Roman de Brut*, based on Geoffrey's text, again shows how narratives of kingship can be adapted to suit new times and new needs. Written for Henry II, the first ruler of the Angevin dynasty following the turbulence of the Civil War, the *Brut* is understandably concerned with the need for stability and a defence of legitimate kingship. Wace, however, negotiates these concerns by making the case for moderation, moving towards a courtly understanding of kingship which uses a re-imagined British past to answer contemporary questions about the duties of kingship. Layamon's *Brut*, the final text of the third chapter, and the only one in English, demonstrates a continuation of these themes, yet also shows a shift in thinking about kingship. Layamon connects his tale of England's history closely to the land, and strongly connected to the land, the law. The new Norman rulers did not bring any laws with them, but soon recognised their importance for the kingdom's stability.<sup>784</sup> Layamon, too, recognised the importance of the law, and his Arthur is depicted as a guardian of the law. Thus, Layamon both continues and adapts a pre-Conquest tradition: the law is important, but unlike Alfred, who created laws to assert his authority, Arthur only protects the laws as they had been passed on to him, and in turn passes them on to his own successor. The laws, then, are connected to the land rather than to a specific ruler. Layamon shows that as long as a ruler accepted the laws of the land, and his responsibility for maintaining them, his origins mattered less.

The development of the role of the king regarding the law continued with *Havelok the Dane*, discussed in the fourth chapter. The story's many earlier versions emphasise how, in the Middle English version, new themes emerge, such as a concern with the law. These earlier versions also demonstrate how stories reflected and reacted to contemporary concerns; the remnants of resistance against the Normans, for instance, can still be seen in the poem. As it stands, however, *Havelok* is a poem about legitimate kingship,

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<sup>784</sup>

Cannon, "Layamon and the Laws", 343.

incorporating into its narrative aspects of good kingship that are clear allusions to Edward I and the political climate in the late thirteenth century. Like the Arthurian tales of chapter three, *Havelok* shows great interest in pre-Conquest England, illustrating once more the unsuitability of overemphasising the Norman Conquest as a great turning point in England's literary history. The *Havelok* poet conjures up a pre-Conquest England through its great king, Athelwold, before employing it to comment on the reign of Edward I. I have argued that *Havelok* becomes associated with Edward through his height and his appetite (linked to purveyance). Additionally, his actions are all centred on the protection of Goldeboru, who can be read as a symbol of England. Edward (through *Havelok*) is shown to be caring towards his people, and the text's interest in those of lower rank is a shift from earlier literature, and one the poet puts to good use. *Havelok*, like his father-in-law Athelwold, is loved by all of his people, despite what he demands of them—in the poem, unlike in real life, his subjects accept that all is for their own good. *Havelok*'s role as the protector of law and land underscore his commitment to justice for all of his people. It is exactly these sentiments Edward himself intended to convey in his letter in 1297.

In my introduction, I posited three guiding questions for this study: How did English authors from the early to later Middle Ages approach and respond to ideas about kingship? How do ideas about kingship evolve from earlier texts to later texts? And, finally, how influential was the contemporary political landscape? The four case studies I have discussed have demonstrated that writers did not express their ideas about kingship in isolation. Rather, they did so in an ongoing conversation with contemporary events, culture, and values, continuously reflecting, reacting to, and reshaping conceptions of kingship and the duties that come with the exertion of royal authority. These duties, I have argued, remained constant. The Norman Conquest did not change the fact that a king had a duty to protect his people, nor that a king could demand loyalty from his subjects in order to do so. The increasingly complex nature of government, a development which was already underway long before the Norman Conquest, meant that rulers and writers had to rethink the ways in which they ruled an increasingly large and complex kingdom, which consisted of two separate land masses. Both Alfred and Edward I did so in ways which left clear traces in English literature. Thus, while the Conquest certainly brought many changes, conceptions of kingship expressed in medieval vernacular literature form part of an ongoing conversation that connects pre-Conquest and post-Conquest England, a conversation which is still taking place today.

As a result, I argue that further research into medieval ideas about kingship in England not only needs to be placed firmly in its historical and political contexts, but would also benefit from being presented as part of a wider narrative that extends beyond prevalent temporal and geographical boundaries. Of course, a study's scope can never be so wide as to include all that could be possibly be said, and thus research always has its limitations. However, this thesis has reinforced the importance of challenging existing boundaries, in order to do justice to the versatility and variety of medieval English literature. The literature expressing medieval English conceptions of kingship is versatile and dynamic, and narratives of kingship are passed on to next generations who adapt and reshape them in order to reflect on new circumstances and political realities.

Based on the findings of this thesis, there are several avenues for research that could be explored. First of all, the role of material culture and archaeology. It would be interesting to consider how a study of royal objects such as the Alfred Jewel, for instance, could contribute to insights into changing notions of kingship. Based on Abigail Wheatley's work, the role of castles and other building work associated with kings would provide new avenues for exploration. What was their exact role, how did a king aim to express royal authority through the use of these structures, and how do these expressions compare to those found in literary texts? Additionally, it should be reiterated that the developments in conceptions of kingship discussed here did not occur in isolation, but were part of a wider, more international, network of narratives about kingship. It would be fruitful to explore these connections more fully. For instance, how does medieval Scandinavian literature depict kingship, and how does that differ from the picture painted here? The implications of this thesis, then, reveal the importance of challenging the idea that medieval literature only reflects contemporary concerns. Rather, it is part of ever-changing and developing narratives that stretch to and include our modern times as well. Today, we are still thinking and writing about good leadership, comparing our contemporary concerns with a (re-) imagined past, just as the writers discussed in this thesis did many centuries ago.

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